International Journal of Business and Applied Social Science (IJBASS)

VOL: 4, ISSUE: 6
June 2018
http://ijbassnet.com/
E-ISSN: 2469-6501

The Synergy between Psychology and Business: A Case Study on Interdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

Michael Dunlop, MBA, Ed.D.
Visiting Associate Professor
Department of Information Systems & Operations Management
Sawyer Business School,
Suffolk University
120 Tremont Street, Sargent Hall 5104,
Boston, MA 02108
Office: 617-973-5375; Cell: 781-234-4039
Email: mdunlop@suffolk.edu
USA

Abstract

Interdisciplinary faculty collaboration is an effective technique for preparing college students for the demands of working in contemporary organizations. Higher education institutions should encourage and support faculty from different academic disciplines to educate students from interdisciplinary perspectives. When faculty from multiple academic disciplines collaborates, they are not only teaching students from new viewpoints, but they are also modeling the importance of communication, teamwork, diversity, and how to critically think from a holistic approach. This case study explored the synergy that exists between the academic disciplines of psychology and business. Twenty-five senior psychology students were introduced to a self-reflection assessment and an interactive discussion on motivation in the workplace from a business perspective. This was accomplished by illustrating the complementary motivational theories relating to Maslow's Needs Hierarchy and Alderfer's ERG Theory. Students' receptivity to these different, yet harmonizing, theories further demonstrated that various perspectives can still share several commonalities. Contemporary organizations increasingly value employees with diverse skill sets. Superseding a single discipline in favor of a multiple discipline approach highlights the value that interdisciplinary collaboration can provide to organizations as they achieve their goals and fulfill their respective mission and longer-term vision statements.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, Faculty Collaboration, Motivation, Psychology and Business

Introduction

Often times the concept of working in silos is analogous with academia. Dismantling academic silos takes the commitment from faculty across and within academic disciplines. Creating an atmosphere that encourages and supports interdisciplinary faculty collaboration is important, particularly when educating students for the work world where interdisciplinary skills sets are in demand. Jerath (2017) asserts that "organizations are expanding job descriptions to include hybrid skills in job titles that earlier functioned in silos" (para.4). Regardless of an employee's role within an organization, there is an expectation for them to be able to apply their insights and work in partnership with other teams where the focus is on the big picture and not outdated silo skills and mindsets (Jerath, 2017). Consequently, higher education institutions should be training students for these diverse skill sets, by eliminating barriers that produce academic silos in the first place.

Several challenges of interdisciplinary faculty collaboration revolve around time constraints, such as conflicting class schedules, off sequenced development periods, as well as committee responsibilities, department meetings, and discipline-specific research agendas.Despite these constraints, one hallmark of education is to create a positive atmosphere that is conducive to student learning. Providing students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the ever-changing multifaceted demands of the current work world is a challenge encountered by faculty. Styron (2013) states that "interdisciplinary education promotes a focus on big ideas and thinking beyond the constraints of a single content area through the acquisition of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication skills" (p. 50). Faculty that can model the

VOL: 4, ISSUE: 6
June 2018
http://ijbassnet.com/
E-ISSN: 2469-6501

importance of interdisciplinary collaboration can have a positive impact on student learning for the "real world." An effective technique that goes beyond simple guest lecturers or cross-discipline committee membership is to actively engage students in interdisciplinary learning activities. This type of active learning helps students make logical and complementary connections with other academic disciplines. In 2013, The American Psychological Association's (APA) guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major stated that "even if a student receives a bachelor's degree in psychology, that student is not required to go into a psychology-related field when entering the workforce" (p.65). Therefore, psychology graduates may obtain entry-level employment in occupations that are not necessarily reflective of their academic preparation (APA,2013). There are many potential careers related to the business field that are relevant to undergraduates with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Some examples include human resource advisor, benefits manager, department manager, employment specialist, management analyst, and market research analyst, to name just a few (APA,2013). Landrum (2018) asserts that "the psychology bachelor's degree qualifies a person for a large number of jobs, but the degree does not uniquely qualify a person for any particular job" (para. 2).

Jerath believes that "colleges and universities should start designing courses that focus on imparting hybrid skills to students; they need to develop system thinkers who not only acquire the domain knowledge but also grasp the ability to take a creative and synergetic approach to problem-solving" (2017, para. 11).

It would be reasonable to conclude that, for example, majoring in psychology and minoring in business, is an effective way to make connections between the disciplines. Conversely, it could be argued that, without genuine interdisciplinary faculty collaboration, such an approach would be futile. As a result, "it may be best suited to prepare students for real-world challenges as today's problems are not contained within discrete skills and concepts, but across a broad spectrum of skills and concepts best addressed through integrated competencies" (Styron, 2013, p. 50). Illustrating integrated competencies from different academic perspectives can highlight the importance of this broad spectrum skill set. For instance, interpersonal skills from a psychological perspective can blend well with viewing business beyond merely maximizing profits. This aligns well with the triple bottom line perspective of people, planet, and profits. The triple bottom line analogy represents exemplifies the broadening expectations that organizations adopt in terms of corporate social responsibility, environmental sustainability, as well as an ongoing financial concern.

Students benefit from interdisciplinary faculty collaboration, not only as an effective teaching tool but also as a way to introduce them to the hiring needs of contemporary organizations. Hart Research Associates (2013) found that "employers consistently rank outcomes and practices that involve the application of skills over the acquisition of discrete bodies of knowledge" (para. 6).

The theoretical elements of psychology and the practical applications within a business context highlight the importance of these complementary skill sets. There is supporting evidence that employers "strongly endorse practices that require students to demonstrate both acquisition of knowledge and its application" (Hart Research Associates, 2013, para. 6).

Furthermore, job satisfaction for the newer workplace generations; namely, the Millennials and Generation Z's, place importance on communication and collaboration with co-workers and managers. The opportunity to expand skill sets, with the opportunity to grow a skill in one place and then to grow a skill in another place is important for these future employees (Maurer, 2016).

It is important to remain focused on the benefits of increased faculty collaboration, which can help to maintain a dynamic educational institution that ultimately promotes a healthy learning environment for students (Baldwin and Chang, 2007). Collaboration also requires individuals and institutions to step out of their respective comfort zones where they usually operate quite autonomously (Baldwin and Chang, 2007). Often times, depending on the size of the educational institution, the academic organizational chart often places psychology and business-related disciplines in completely separate colleges, reporting to two separate deans. It is not uncommon, for instance, that a psychology department is housed within a college of arts and sciences, whereas, a business department may have its own business college. Organizational structures alone can impede the process of interdisciplinary faculty collaboration. However, interdisciplinary faculty collaboration can be effectively implemented within higher education institutions, particularly when such initiatives are

International Journal of Business and Applied Social Science (IJBASS)

VOL: 4, ISSUE: 6
June 2018
http://ijbassnet.com/
E-ISSN: 2469-6501

encouraged, supported, and focused on objective outcomes of students and learning.

Methodology

The following case illustrates a method to encourage and promote interdisciplinary faculty collaboration. This was accomplished by the formation of a small group of faculty at a mid-size urban university. With support from the university, the members were part of a Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FPLC) where they were able to demonstrate the importance of collaboration and the inherent value of diverse pedagogical viewpoints in educating students. By definition,"FPLCs are cross-disciplinary groups of 5-8 faculty, staff, and administrators who meet throughout the academic year to share their experiences, learn from one another, and explore the literature on the latest pedagogical and curricular trends" (Suffolk University, n.d.).

The members of the FPLC for the 2017-2018 academic years included six full-time faculty members representing diverse academic disciplines. The faculties were from different colleges and departments within the university. The departments represented from the college of arts and sciences included English, interior design, and psychology. The college of business was represented by the departments of information systems & operations management and marketing. The six member group functioned as a diverse and supportive team and worked collectively as a whole, as well as in smaller break-out teams. This case study highlights the interaction between the psychology and the information systems & operations management faculty. The theme of this collaboration was on the relevance and natural synergy that exists between psychology and business. Both theoretical and practical connections that psychology has with the business world were introduced to a class of 25 undergraduate psychology students enrolled in their senior capstone course.

This case study demonstrated interdisciplinary faculty collaboration and the positive impact it can have on student learning. Motivation in the workplace was the specific focus of this case, since motivation was an effective example that highlighted the connections between business and psychology. And, by leveraging these academic disciplines within a contemporary organization, demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. For example, maximizing employee performance can be achieved, not only through an understanding of the psychological underpinnings of motivation, but also with the practical applications of how motivation impacts organizational efficiency and effectiveness. This particular case study illustrated and reinforced the relationship between psychology and business acumen through self-assessment activities and reflection exercises.

Upper level psychology students are generally familiar with motivation from varying perspectives, such as intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation and, of course, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory. The students were introduced to the role of business management within organizations and the varying management styles, with a particular emphasis on motivation in the workplace. Although all of the students were familiar with Maslow's Hierarchy, none of the students were aware of Alderfer's ERG (Existence, Relatedness, and Growth) Theory.

Table 1: Needs Hierarchies & Work Related Examples

Maslow	Alderfer	Work Related Examples
Self-Actualization	Growth	Recognition, awards, self-pride in one's work, fulfilling career, and realizing one's dream job.
Esteem		
Belongingness	Relatedness	Feeling part of a team, positive work relationships, and fitting in with the work culture.
Safety	Existence	Compensation, benefits (e.g., health insurance, retirement, paid-time off), and safe working conditions.
Physiological		

International Journal of Business and Applied Social Science (IJBASS)

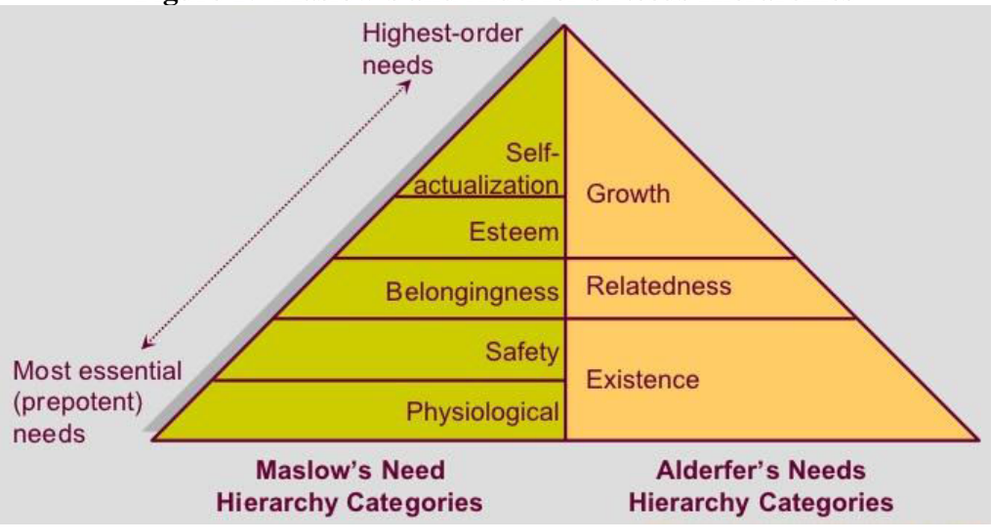
VOL: 4, ISSUE: 6
June 2018
http://ijbassnet.com/
E-ISSN: 2469-6501

Caulton (2012) reveals that ERG has been used as a construct to understand what internal perspectives motivate humans to certain behaviors, as they relate job performance to existence, relatedness, and growth. From a psychological viewpoint, this lends itself very well to several psychological theories on motivation, such as intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, personality types, and individual vs. group dynamics.

To further demonstrate workplace motivation, students completed a 12-question self-assessment related to Alderfer's ERG Theory (Prentice Hall Business Publishing, 2002). An in-depth discussion followed, which actively engaged the students in self-reflection, analysis, and a discussion on what motivates them in the workplace. Each of the assessment questions on motivation are categorized into one of the three areas of existence, relatedness, and growth. For example, a benefits program would be categorized as existence, being accepted by others would be categorized as relatedness, and opportunities for personal development would be categorized as growth. Table 1 provides further work-related examples as they apply to Maslow's and Alderfer's Needs Hierarchies.

As a result of this case study, students reported an understanding and an appreciation for the interconnectedness between the academic disciplines of psychology and business. This interactive, interdisciplinary discussion on motivation in the workplace effectively exemplified the complementary theories of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Alderfer's ERG Theory. Figure 1 (Middlemist, 2005) summarizes the theoretical relationship between Maslow and Alderfer.

Figure 1: Maslow's and Alderfer's Needs Hierarchies



(Middlemist, 2005, slide 11).

Conclusion

Illustrating the interconnectedness and natural synergy that exists between psychology and business can serve as a platform for interdisciplinary learning activities with other academic disciplines. "Psychology has evolved into a complex discipline with a broad array of sub-disciplines and specialties" (APA, 2013). This case study demonstrated the synergy that exists between psychology and business, with an emphasis on motivation. Using this case as a model, there are a multitude of other academic disciplines and specific topic areas that can be integrated through faculty collaboration. Bringing together diverse disciplines and employing integrated studies can enable students to make meaningful associations and influences within a specific topic (Cruickshank,2008). Higher education institutions that encourage, support, and recognize faculty who collaborate on interdisciplinary learning initiatives is important. This case illustrated just one example of how this type of collaboration can be successful. In conclusion, collaborative learning exercises with other academic disciplines are an effective method to prepare students for the multi-faceted skill sets increasingly demanded in the contemporary workplace.

VOL: 4, ISSUE: 6
June 2018
http://ijbassnet.com/
E-ISSN: 2469-6501

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association. (2013). *APA guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major: Version 2.0*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/undergrad/index.aspx

Baldwin, R. G. and Chang, D. A. (2007). Collaborating to learn, learning to collaborate. *Association of American Colleges & Universities, Peer Review. Fall 2017, 9*(4). Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/collaborating-learn-learning-collaborate

Caulton, J. R. (2012). The development and use of the theory of ERG: A literature review. *Emerging Leadership Journeys, Regent University School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship*. *5*(1), 2-8.

Cruickshank, D.(2008).Kaleidoscopic learning: An overview of integrated studies. Retrieved from https://www.edutopia.org/integrated-studies-interdisciplinary- learning-overview

Hart Research Associates (2013). It takes more than a major: Employer priorities for college learning and student success. *Association of American Colleges & Universities, Peer Review. Spring 2013, 99*(2). Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/it-takes-more-major-employer-priorities-college-learning-and

Jerath, A. (2017). Hybrid roles – the future of jobs? *Society for Human Resource Management. December 21, 2017.* Retrieved from https://www.shrm.org/shrm-india/pages/hybrid-roles-the-future-of-jobs.aspx

Landrum, E. R. (2018). What can you do with a bachelor's degree in psychology? *Psychology Teacher Network. May 2018, 28*(2).

Maurer, R. (2016). 'Digital natives' value in-person collaboration. *Society for Human Resource Management. October 17, 2016.* Retrieved from https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/digital-natives-value-collaboration.aspx

Middlemist, D. R. (2005). Maslow's and Alderfer's needs theories [PowerPoint Image, slide 11]. *Pearson Prentice Hall*. Retrieved from https://www.slideshare.net/secrethr/motivational-theories-11751847

Prentice Hall Business Publishing (2002). The self-assessment library. What motivates me? *Prentice-Hall, Inc. (a Division of Pearson Education)*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey. Retrieved from http://www.prenhall.com/divisions/bp/app/sal_custom/wam/q13.html

Styron, Jr., R. A. (2013). Interdisciplinary education: A reflection of the real world. *The Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics. 11*(9), 47-52.

Suffolk University (n.d.). Faculty and Professional Learning Communities. *Center for Teaching and Scholarly Excellence.* Retrieved from http://www.suffolk.edu/academics/28956.php