

**BOARDROOM IN THE CLASSROOM: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OF CORPORATE
CULTURE**

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Abstract

Marketing educators prepare undergraduate students for careers in the global business realm by instructing them on the concepts and theoretical foundations of the discipline while arming them with the tools and skill sets required to succeed. However, many graduates are not adequately prepared for immediate assimilation into a professional corporate environment. Business executives complain of too much time wasted while newly hired graduates adjust to the unique culture and protocol of the commercial world. The technique of immersing students into a workplace setting, created within the classroom, is the essence of pragmatic learning through *Boardroom in the Classroom*. Senior marketing majors have the opportunity to experience, respond, rehearse and adapt to a professional corporate culture in a classroom location. Initial research results of this innovative educational paradigm indicate that participants in the *Boardroom in the Classroom* practice environment feel significantly more confident in their readiness to begin their careers immediately after graduation.

Boardroom in the Classroom: Experiential Learning of Corporate Culture

College graduates enter the workforce armed with discipline knowledge and skill sets germane to their chosen occupation. However, many have failed to accumulate professional business level acuity prior to graduation. This void often results in criticisms from corporate directors. Business executives complain of time being wasted while newly hired graduates adjust to the unique culture and protocol of the commercial world. HR and business managers concur that because of this missing ingredient most new employee's lack the professional competencies required to commence immediate productivity. Academia has been challenged by this obstacle for many years, but there is only so much the faculty and administration can do beyond the basic class format (Chonko and Roberts 1996). Limited solutions are found in co-ops, internships and practicums, unfortunately not all students meet eligibility requirements and some universities do not have the resources to adequately supervise and fund these types of opportunities. Traditional students should be afforded the prospect of accruing professional business experience superfluous to the typical college student jobs of waiting tables, bartending, and clerking at retail establishments.

Over the years, hiring managers have conveyed apprehensions that students encountered a sort of culture shock as they transfer from the structured academic atmosphere to a more independent corporate environment (Lazer and Frayer 2000; Lundstrom and White 1997). Comments by business executives at a NCSC Advisory Board Meeting reflect these same trepidations of recent graduates who "frequently require several months to break out of their shell and begin taking part in the action with the rest of the firm's more seasoned staff. Before then, they walk around like zombies or lap dogs with little or no fire inside. There is often little initiative taken on their own and we hold their hand and give them step by step directions in order to get them to do anything" (2011).

Technique

Responding to these criticisms drove the authors to create a method of educating students in which participants would be immersed in a business environment without changing geographical location. Labeled the *Boardroom in the Classroom* (BINC), the semester long course is structured as a professional, corporate organization, complete with human resources, training, job descriptions, project assignments and evaluations. New employees (students) are exposed to a corporate environment throughout the learning process. Their engagement with the corporate world while still within the university stricture permits the class members to acquire a cultural familiarity that otherwise would be lacking. Acclimation to the corporate environment is a fundamental goal of the BINC activity. This preparation will empower students to hit the ground running by allowing them to immediately incorporate the theories, techniques, and ambiance learned through BINC into their new careers.

In the *Boardroom in the Classroom* model, the students enter the classroom as if it were their first day on the job. From the moment they cross through the doorway, the instructor begins to indoctrinate them into corporate culture. Students enrolled in the class become “new employees” of the business and the instructor assumes the role of corporate supervisor or business manager. The new employees will then progress through a sequence of training activities that will continue until the end of the semester.

Boardroom in the Classroom

Entering into the ‘workplace’ for the first time, the new employee (student) is greeted by the hiring manager (instructor) who welcomes them and explains how they are to become integral parts of the organization. Keeping in character, much like that of a high school Spanish teacher refusing to speak anything but Spanish, the instructor continues the role of the hiring manager through all initial classroom activities. To accomplish this, many of the administrative tasks that instructors are accustomed to completing at the beginning of a semester should be disguised as duties the HR department of a firm performs during indoctrination of a new employee. Syllabi would be veiled as employee handbooks, correspondence as memo’s, etc.

From here, the new employees are informed that they are to operate as a team and will represent the firm. Each team member has been hired for an assigned role and will perform specific duties within that role. These job descriptions will depend on the nature of the course that the instructor is teaching. For example, if the instructor chooses to integrate the *Boardroom in the Classroom* model in a marketing research course, the instructor will operate the class as a marketing research department of a firm that is conducting a large 3-4 month project. Job descriptions would include a team manager, data analysis group, data accumulation, team presenters, etc. A business to business course might involve a team manager as well as a sales staff, buyers, etc. Once roles are assigned students are expected to perform the required obligations throughout the course. Role playing is extended to include all interaction and communication among employees and is expected to mirror exactly how interdepartmental communication occurs within a firm.

Lecture material can be relayed to the students much like that of in-house training for new employees, i.e. the manager (instructor) presents novice employees (students) with information needed to better perform their job. If the class meets multiple times per week, academic material should be presented at the initial weekly meeting. Also, at the end of class tasks are typically assigned with a deadline of the next scheduled meeting date. Assignments should be correlated with theoretical information to accentuate the concepts and enhance learning.

On the second meeting of the week, the new employees congregate in the boardroom for a consultation on their progress. With the instructor acting as the business manager, each department is responsible for reporting their activities including reviewing previous assignments, highlighting significant findings, and presenting new challenges or opportunities. Using a structure much like that of a case dialogue the manager (instructor) acts as discussion leader and guides the participants thorough the findings without controlling or dominating the dialog.

Senior students are more likely to assume principal positions in the boardroom conversation and tend to undertake leadership roles within the various departments.

Towards the end of the semester, students in the class will have accumulated a semester's equivalent of lectured instruction. Other deliverables include completed assignments coordinated with the weekly lectures and a department project which culminates in a final report and presentation to the manager (instructor). The integration of BINC into upper division courses has the added bonus of permitting the creation of intricate, critical decision making scenarios and comprehensive projects.

Maintaining character throughout the entire semester may be difficult; however, it is possible through careful pre-class planning. Camouflaging the classroom into a business workplace is realized both figuratively and literally by simply rearranging classroom furniture to represent a corporate conference room. Requiring students to follow a strict business dress code adds to the illusion especially when the professor adheres to the same rules. The instructor may even be encouraged to drop the formality of being referred to as Dr. Jones and instead adopt Mr. /Mrs. Jones.

University and administrative bureaucracy are easily disguised as a corporate hierarchy. When organizational duties are necessary the jobs can be simply concealed as an announcement or directive from company departments such as Human Resources (HR) or Technology (IT). Paperwork, including lecture materials, assignments, etc. should be print on corporate letterhead, and correspondence such as emails or memos must incorporate the organizations format to complete the transition. All of these materials are effortlessly created by the instructor prior to the beginning of the semester and assist in perpetuating the corporate atmosphere. This innovative educational strategy brings the boardroom to the classroom to acclimate future graduates in the corporate protocol that awaits them.

The *Boardroom in the Classroom* technique is unique to many similar experiential learning methods already used by academics (Kolb 1984; Lewis and Williams 1994). Many in use today, (i.e. micro businesses; simulations) do a wonderful job of correlating expertise with definitive aptitudes while accompanying course material (Peterson and Albertson 2006). The prior examples zeroed in on improvement of specific applied skills, in real world scenarios. These methods were advanced in order to assist the student in becoming more proficient when applying specific abilities. The technique discussed in this paper is not focused so much on course content, but on corporate culture and protocol. While the instructor concentrates on teaching the required course material, students are simultaneously immersed in the protocol and culture of a professional work environment.

The desire to educate the student in the ways of professional business culture and protocol is not new. Some of the strategies considered by the author's college include the insertion of business etiquette, public speaking, and even dining decorum into various classes. However, as with many university business curriculums, there is simply not enough time or available elective credit hours to squeeze in everything relevant. Typically, if additions are made, somewhere something has to be removed. Another concern is buy-in from faculty who are unwilling to sacrifice their class time and content. External seminars on business culture, protocol, dress, and etiquette have been available to business majors, however, as with many other programs, student attendance appears bleak without some type of incentive for participation.

Applying the Boardroom to the Classroom Model

The *Boardroom in the Classroom* strategy has actually been applied to several senior level marketing classes. What follows is a summary of the process as it was activated in a business-to-business marketing course.

Prior to the class beginning and student arrival, the classroom desks and chairs were arranged to reflect a “boardroom” look. Using a fictitious company name along with a fabricated product offering (computer chips) the manager (instructor) welcomed the new employees (students) as they arrived and introduced himself as Mr. Smith, shaking their hands as they entered the room. The syllabus and other course material were printed on ‘corporate’ letterhead using templates found in Microsoft Office Word. From here, the manager maintained a number of other pedagogical duties disguised as human resource functions. At the outset this included creating corporate identification badges complete with photographs and titles. This exercise served two functions, familiarizing the instructor with the students and completing record keeping purposes for the company. All communication incorporated a business format, including email, letters, or even a simple phone call or text message. Corporate training was the mechanism for teaching academic content and included lectures with presentation slides where the fictitious company’s logo was prominent.

The business manager assumes responsibility of organizing the new employees into functional departments of the firm. These appointments can be arbitrary or by having the employees apply for specific jobs. In this case, some were hired and assigned to a sales team in which they were to sell the company’s chips, others consigned to a buying department in which they were to purchase the materials necessary to build the chips. A Marketing Department was also established in order to develop and monitor the promotion and communication of the company. Department responsibilities were assigned and delegated according to the department’s functional role, and specific tasks were created for each operational area to complement the scholarly material of the course. A timeline was established with deadlines which were set and typically occurred at the end of the week to coincide with *Boardroom in the Classroom* sessions.

The final weekly activities of BINC began in the assembly room, with employees sitting at the conference tables. The manager has requested a departmental report to be prepared on all assignments. During the accounting the manager uses the process to explore further into the results to test the employee’s grasp of the material as well as to help the other departments understand the assigned task. Conclusion of the meeting brings distribution of new assignments and the training cycle starts over. Organization members were requested to maintain their professional identity throughout the academic semester.

In this particular class, the instructor used weekly quizzes to ascertain student’s knowledge. While there were no exams, projects or tasks were assigned to the departments to mimic responsibilities and duties of corporate functional teams. In addition to course content, writing ability and professionalism of deliverables were graded. Presentations and written reports were evaluated on proficiency, clarity and contribution.

Study

The impact of the *Boardroom in the Classroom* technique was evaluated using two sections of the same course. One class was used as the control sample and the other exposed to the BINC method. Other than the BINC strategy, all aspects of the class were identical (i.e. same course, material, instructor, etc.). The sample included two courses of business to business marketing (n=95).

Students from each class were introduced to a pre-course survey of their expectations of the course as well as a post-course survey on their perceptions of how prepared they were for the corporate environment. Questions were created ad-hoc by the authors with the help of hiring managers from local corporations. Using a 7 point Likert scale, with 7 – being strongly agree and 1 – being strongly disagree, no significant difference was found between the groups in any of the pre-course questions ($p < .09$). However, a significant difference was found between each of the post-course questions ($p < .01$). Table 1 presents respondents reactions to each of the pre and post class survey questions.

Table 1

Pre and Post Course Means

	No BINC Treatment (std. dev)	BINC Treatment (std. dev)
Pre-Course		
1. I feel that my college education has prepared me for work in the corporate environment.	4.5 (1.6)	4.4 (1.5)
2. I feel that I will be able to excel in the corporate environment after I graduate.	4.6 (1.5)	4.6 (1.8)
3. I feel that I am ready to begin work immediately after graduation.	4.4 (1.5)	4.5 (1.6)

Post-Course		
1. I feel that my college education has prepared me for work in the corporate environment.	4.7 (1.6)	5.8 (1.2)
2. I feel that I will be able to excel in the corporate environment after I graduate.	4.6 (1.8)	5.2 (1.8)
3. I feel that I am ready to begin work immediately after graduation.	4.8 (1.8)	5.5 (1.0)
4. I feel that this class has prepared me for the corporate environment.	4.0 (1.8)	5.2 (1.3)
5. I feel that I am more prepared for my new career now that I have completed this course.	4.2 (1.6)	4.8 (1.4)
6. I feel that I have an advantage over other students that have not had this class experience.	4.8 (1.6)	5.7 (1.2)
7. I am excited to enter the corporate world as soon as possible.	5.4 (1.4)	5.8 (.9)

* No BINC Experience N= 47, BINC Treatment N=48

Student response to all of the Post-course questions resulted in an improved confidence level when they had been exposed to the *Boardroom in the Classroom* treatment. Specifically, when responding to the question of, “I feel that my college education has prepared me for work in the corporate environment,” students who had experienced BINC had a mean of 5.5 compared to the control mean of 4.8. The *Boardroom in the Classroom* treatment had similar results on the queries of “I feel that I will be able to excel in the corporate environment after I graduate,” and “I feel that I am ready to begin work immediately after graduation,” with means of 4.6 and 4.8 from non-treated students and 5.2 and 5.5 from BINC experience students.

Statement four (4) reads, “I feel that this class has prepared me for the corporate environment.” had an increase from a mean of 4.0 in the control class to a mean of 5.2 in the BINC treated class. Another example is that the students agreed more in the treated course than in the non-treated class to the question that reads, “I feel that I have an advantage over other students that have not had this class experience.” with a score differential of 5.7 treated and 4.8 non-treated. The final post-course question, “I am excited to enter the corporate world as soon as possible,” responses followed the same pattern, with the control students mean 5.4 and the BINC treated student response 5.8.

Conclusion

The *Boardroom in the Classroom* strategy has been utilized several times, and although it is not easy at first, the process becomes less complicated on subsequent applications. The impressive results have proven to be the winning variable. Findings show students enjoy the unique BINC format as opposed to a standard class approach. Second, the survey results indicate students in these classes, when compared to a traditional class, display attitudinal and belief modifications as well. Finally, hiring managers that have employed undergraduates exposed to the BINC technique have noted less ‘culture shock’ when they arrived on the job.

The exposure to a corporate environment, albeit a modeled one, appears to aid in student adjustment to the professional setting. The significant improvement in a student’s confidence level is a sufficient endorsement for acclamation of the *Boardroom in the Classroom* strategy to justify its inclusion into the business curriculum. BINC allows the undergraduates to focus on utilizing the concepts and theoretical foundations of the academic much earlier in the role of a new employee than if they were jumping into the role without the exposure. The BINC model can be fun for the students as well as for the instructor. The end result is that it conquers one of our biggest problems of preparing our students for a transition from academia into the real world. The *Boardroom in the Classroom* innovative educational paradigm indicates that participants in the practice environment feel significantly more confident in their readiness to begin their careers immediately after graduation.

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