

Becoming a strategic learning partner: Applying business frameworks to enhance teaching practice

Satchie Haga

Contact: hagasatchie@gmail.com

Abstract

Prior to commencing a career in education I worked for six years as a business consultant. Many people separate business from education and treat them as distinct entities. However, as a person who has practical experience in both worlds, I feel that although there are differences it does not mean we should treat them separately. There is a lot that business can learn from teaching, and a lot that teaching can learn from business. In this paper I will introduce three practices that are ubiquitous in business, but are not as common in education. I have been applying these practices as a teacher, with significant results, and would like to share them with you.

After graduating university I worked for three years as a business processing analyst for a human capital consulting firm. Basically I was responsible for understanding how my clients process their pension plans, standardize those processes across all clients, and then innovate and streamline them to their most minimal task after which I managed the project to offshore the work to our office in India. The contact with our colleagues in India really opened my eyes to what was going on globally. Prior to this experience I did not have an interest to pursue work outside of Canada. However, my role demonstrated to me the importance of international experience. Although I grew up

in Toronto, and thus had exposure to many different cultures, I had never lived outside

of Canada, and I was keen to immerse myself completely in a different culture so that I could heighten my intercultural sensitivity. So I decided to take a year sabbatical and came to Japan.

In Japan I worked as an executive recruiter for several years when in 2011 I decided to make education my full time career and do a Masters in TESOL. I graduated this May and have begun to work in a university teaching English. As I have only recently made teaching my full time career my business experience is still recent and deeply ingrained within me. Many business practices transcended culture and industry; they were employed in Canada, the local firm I worked in Japan as well as my clients' (Japanese and global) organizations. However, I was surprised to learn that these practices are not used in education. So today I would like to introduce three practices

that I learned in business and have found them to be beneficial to me as a teacher: 1. SMART Goals, 2. Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) 3. Planned Innovation

SMART Goals

SMART is an acronym for five characteristics that are all needed to make goals effective.

S=Specific

M=Measurable

A=Achievable

R=Relevant

T=Time bound

For example a typical goal one might make at the beginning of the year is “I want to improve my English/Japanese”. However, this is not a SMART goal. It does not hold any of the above five characteristics and as such it is less likely to encourage successful attainment of that goal.

Let's consider how to make this goal a SMART goal:

- To make it specific, what aspect of English/Japanese do you want to improve? (eg. Listening? Speaking? Writing? Reading?)
- How will we measure your improvement? (eg. Will we look at your ToEIC/JLPT score? Or test how many words you can read per minute? Or whether or not you can read a novel in your L2 by the end of the year?)
- How can we ensure that your goal is achievable? For instance some students may say that they want to get a ToEIC score of 900. While under certain circumstances this may be attainable but to go from a score of 300 to 900 in one week is very unlikely. Other students may say that they will read an extended reader every day to improve their reading speed. However, given their other commitments is this truly realistic?

To make the goal relevant it must be personal. In business we would tie our individual goals to the organization goals. In my classroom I tie my students' goals with my curriculum goals. For

instance a student may say that they will watch one English movie a month to improve their listening. However, I might add that they watch it without dubbing, or Japanese subtitles to ensure it is relevant.

Finally, is the goal time bound? A goal is more effective if it has a specific and realistic time frame. For example by the end of the year I will have read at least one complete novel in my second language, or I will learn 500 new vocabulary terms and write a story using them.

I use SMART goals for myself as a teacher in my own professional career and I teach them to my students. The students enjoy learning about goal setting and tracking their progress.

Plan Do Check Act (PDCA)

This is a business model that is similar to reflective practice. I use this framework as I design my lesson plans.

- Step 1: Plan the lesson – at this stage it is critical that we give ourselves enough time to tie our lesson objectives with that of our overall course objectives.
- Step 2: Do the lesson
- Step 3: Check- Reflect on how the lesson went. What went well? What did not go as well as we would have liked? Did the lesson meet our objectives? If not why? What can we do going forward?
- Step 4: Act – Use our results to improve our next actions.

What I found is that many teachers get into a habit of only doing Step 1 and Step 2. However, in order to really innovate one's practice Step 3 (reflective practice) and Step 4 (actively change your behavior and practice) are essential.

Planned Innovation

Innovation is critical to business. Any business that wants to be competitive in the market must make a concerted effort to

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consistently innovate. And that innovation must be made from the ground up. As a consultant I had weekly, monthly and yearly goals. These goals were split between administrative objectives and innovation. So, I was not only thinking about what I need to do now, but what can I do now to make things better. Many companies will budget a significant portion of their revenues (eg. 25%) towards research and design of new products or new ways to market existing products. They know that if they do not change while everything around them is evolving, they will not grow and even the seemingly most successful companies can quickly face difficulty if they do not adapt quickly enough to the new environment (eg. Blockbuster, IBM etc.).

I have scheduled innovation into my practice by making it one of my goals to attempt at least one new activity every week. I have long commute to my school and I reflect on my activities on the train. At home I have a spreadsheet where I write down my ideas right away. Every Sunday I look at that spreadsheet with all of my ideas and use that along with my goals to create new lessons.

Conclusion

I have introduced three business practices that I use as a teacher. I think it is important to note that these practices are most effective when applied together. As a teacher with many conflicting demands it is very easy to get used to doing the same lessons. Perhaps as a recent graduate, or new teacher we are excited and motivated to search out and attempt new lessons, but at some point it is very tempting to revert to old materials that we “know” work. Of course there is nothing wrong with using effective activities every year. However, I think it is important to make a planned and concerted effort to consistently search out and try new materials, activities and methods. This innovation should be tied to SMART goals and scheduled to the point it becomes a habit. Moreover, it is critical that when we try out new activities or methods and it does not go as we expected we should not simply dismiss the activity, but rather we should extend our findings from the Plan and Do stage to Check and reflect upon our results and determine how we can make it better and then finally Act on our ideas. Through this cycle not only will our teaching practice consistently improve, but we as people will evolve.

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