



T. Teaching Impact

From awareness to engagement: how can impact pedagogy educate future sustainable leaders?

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Abstract

This paper aims at characterizing what can be called an "impact pedagogy". Building on the literature on sustainability education in business (Béchar, 2017, Schiro, 2013, Hermes and Rimaczy, 2018, Kassel et al. 2016), we examine the impact of an innovative induction seminar called "Designing Tomorrow: Business & Sustainability" created at ESCP Business School in spring 2019. We explore more specifically the following questions: How can students' learning processes contribute to making an effective impact on a more sustainable approach in business? What are the main characteristics of the pedagogical design that enable the empowerment of students?

The empirical data come from the description and assessment of the pedagogical design encompassing a 3-day seminar, followed by a 3-month field investigation on a controversy related to business transformation issues due to climate change. A specific focus is given to two classes in which a partnership was developed with an insightful change-maker, Eric Duverger -ESCP alumnus and former top executive of Michelin. He offered the students the opportunity to work on a field investigation in order to help him prepare a transformative project for corporations, called "Convention des Entreprises pour le Climat".

Our study reveals that a virtuous loop was created between the students and the partner thanks to the specific learning dynamics of the seminar, which we call "impact pedagogy". The empowering effect of impact pedagogy can explain the transition from awareness-raising to effective engagement of both students and partner, leading to the creation of the "Convention des Entreprises pour le Climat" which aims to enroll 150 CEOs in July 2021.

Keywords: Sustainability education, impact pedagogy, empowering education, business & climate change, pedagogical triangulation

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What pedagogical design do we need for sustainability education?

Within the context of business education, sustainability breaks with the classical representations of the mission of the firm, the purpose of business curricula, the role of professors, as well as the conditions of learning or assessment. It belongs to a vision of education that refers to "the Social Reconstruction ideology" (Schiro, 2013) which argues that schools should teach students to become critical and analytical thinkers, and to be aware of the unsuitability of '*business as usual*' to the ongoing social and environmental crises in our society. In that vision, education focuses on values and implies a pedagogy focused on crisis resolution in partnership with societal actors. Further to the "Principles for Responsible Management Education" (PRME) launched in 2007 at the initiative of the UN, this educational ideology has emerged recently in Business Schools (Béchar, 2017). However, due to the scarcity of pedagogical expertise in business schools (Béchar, 2020) and to the lack of stabilized concepts in sustainability (Figueiró and Raufflet, 2015), the appropriate pedagogical design for sustainability education remains unclear.

Within the education literature, three sources provide insights to guide the design of pedagogical programs which facilitate awareness and the emergence of change-making behaviors. They offer complementary facets of an empowering process to educate future sustainable leaders.

The Scandinavian approach (Kassel et al. 2016, Hermes et al. 2018) provides a theoretical model of educational goals that are associated with the development of a sustainability mindset. It calls for the development of knowledge (thinking), values (being) and competency (doing) in four domains: ecological worldview, systems perspective, spiritual intelligence and emotional intelligence. Moreover, this approach has identified three critical moments in this learning journey: firstly, awareness is raised about global social and environmental problems. In a second stage, individuals realize the gap between their personal values and the impact of their action, which makes them experience a cognitive dissonance with high emotional shock. Finally, individuals engage in reducing this dissonance by actively solving problems they were previously not conscious of.

The famous Brazilian author Freire (1974) provided a detailed description of the emancipatory process that helps oppressed people free themselves. He stresses the importance of articulating the awareness process (understanding the causes of what oppresses you and the associated fears) with a transformative action that is produced collectively and accompanied by a reflexive learning process throughout the project. Reflexive learning is facilitated by an authentic dialogue between the educator, learners and "revolutionary leaders" who take risks and propose realistic ways to overcome oppressive systems. Emancipation is manifested when individuals feel that their self is reunified and that they can transform what they previously perceived as out of control, dangerous, complex and mysterious.

Finally, Fernagu-Oudet (2012) studied the characteristics of empowering educational environments. She explains that it is not sufficient to propose learning resources to learners. You must help them identify and seize opportunities to really become autonomous. Help consists in meetings and coaching during which learners can choose what they want to learn, identify by themselves the resources they need, critically assess them and share their learning in an authentic manner.

These educational principles contributed to the development of a new learning innovation in sustainability and business, addressed at a cohort of more than 400 students starting their Master's degree.

"Designing Tomorrow: business & sustainability"

In May 2019, a group of ESCP professors took part in a Climate Collage workshop, a specific activity set up during a Faculty Meeting in Berlin. This 3-hour workshop was aimed at understanding the causes and consequences of climate change, in order to create awareness, understanding, and the motivation to act among participants. This workshop had an "eye opening" effect on participants and generated debate among professors on how to scale up existing local initiatives on sustainability to a much bigger audience, in order to address all students. It marked the starting point for the creation of a new induction seminar, as it was obvious that the induction seminar of the Master in Management (Grande Ecole) was the ideal moment to initiate a wide-ranging reflection on sustainability issues and the required transformations of our economic and managerial systems. The design of this seminar was led by Ann-Charlotte Teglborg and Aurélien Acquier, and involved 14 professors from all departments of the school.

The school's executive board gave its unconditional support to the initiative, which fitted with the school's transformation project. On the side of the students, the context was also favourable. In May 2019, the "Student Manifesto for an Ecological Awakening"¹ gathered more than 30,000 signatures of students from French Universities and Grandes Écoles, calling out public and private institutions for their lethargy in the face of the climate challenge.

Expectations from students, the school's executive board and those of a group of professors all aligned perfectly to give birth to the seminar "Designing Tomorrow: business & sustainability". Aimed at more than 400 pre-master students who join the school each September to start the Master in Management degree of ESCP Business School, the seminar aims to educate them on climate change and the social challenges faced by our societies, to help them understand the link between these environmental issues and management, and to identify levers of action for managers.

"Designing Tomorrow: business & sustainability" is a two-fold process encompassing a 3-day seminar, followed by a 3-month field investigation into a sociotechnical controversy on a sustainability issue involving companies as well as other stakeholders. The seminar involves small group interactions with 14 professors (in groups of 30 students), as well as large sessions with sustainability leaders, 16 professionals in sustainability, and 75 studies of sociotechnical controversies conducted over 3 months, in small groups of 5 students. From the beginning of the seminar and throughout the field investigation, students are asked to write a reflexive report on their emotional and learning trajectory, which they submit at the end of the 3-month cycle.

¹ <https://pour-un-reveil-ecologique.org/f>

Methodology

We analyzed the educational process and its impact perceived by students through their assessments of the course, and more precisely through their final reflexive debriefing (1000-3000 words for each student). We also conducted a semi-directive in-depth interview with Eric Duverger two months after the end of the student project. We asked him about the relationships between the student's learning trajectory and the development of his project.

Step 1: a 3-day Induction seminar: from awareness to identification with positive role models

The 3-day seminar aims to create a learning dynamic in three stages. The first stage aims at raising students' awareness and boosting their understanding of key sustainability issues, and getting them to question existing business practices and business models in this context. This stage is based on a "pedagogical triangulation" comprising three modalities: reading academic articles received before the seminar, understanding the causes and consequences of climate change thanks to a workshop organised in partnership with the association La Fresque du Climat (the Climate Collage workshop, which had triggered the initial impetus for reframing the induction seminar), and an encounter with key "Great Witnesses", such as Laurence Tubiana, former Ambassador in charge of negotiations on climate change and special representative for the COP 21 and President of the European Climate Foundation (ECF), Alain Grandjean, President of the Nicolas Hulot Foundation and founder of the Carbone4 consultancy company.



2019: first edition of the designing tomorrow – business and sustainability seminar, with the climate collage for the 400 premaster students

The majority of students already had some knowledge of the disturbing reality of global warming and its consequences, but it was not complete. *"The seminar enlightened me on*

the complexity and importance of a process that I had not fully appreciated"; "I was previously sensitive to the issue of energy transition. However, the seminar sharpened my critical thinking skills and made me aware of the fundamental issues." Moreover, many of them didn't feel concerned professionally: *"I think I was already sensitive to the issue of sustainable development before I joined ESCP, but without having the idea of one day making it my professional activity"*. At this stage, expert role models had a crucial impact: they obliged students to take a critical stance by becoming more aware of the urgency: *"Alain Grandjean's and Laurence Tubiana's speeches reinforced my awareness of the climate emergency"*. The students also often expressed intense emotions in their reflexive report, like this student who declared: *"I was aware of climate change, but now I have understood the full extent of the problem. It's pretty terrifying. What to do?"*.

This emotional state, creating a cognitive dissonance amongst students, was anticipated by the team of professors. Therefore, the second day offered authentic encounters in smaller groups, allowing students to identify with positive role models, who could be labelled as "revolutionary leaders" in Freire's words. During a sequence called "What if it were me?", a manager or an entrepreneur working on sustainability topics testified in front of a class of 30 students to explain how to integrate sustainability at the core of his/her professional life. Entrepreneurs and managers also had students reflect on a current problem, dilemma or project, inviting students to put themselves in his/her shoes. For example, in one of the classes, Rose-May Lucotte, co-founder of Change Now was invited: *"Meeting Rose-May Lucotte changed my mind. For me, she is the example showing that even after graduating from a business school, one can choose to embrace a career that embodies a real commitment to society"* testifies one student.

The next sequence explored ethical decision making within a corporation in the context of a sustainability crisis. It consisted in a role play based on the case of a fast fashion company facing a crisis in Bangladesh. The students simulated the board of directors during which they must make a crisis-management decision in a context where several members of the board of directors push for opposing decisions, question the business model and want to rethink the company's strategy.



The day ended with an encounter between the 400 students with another Great Witness. Jean-Moreau is the Co-founder and CEO of Phenix, a Benefit Corporation and fast-growing start-up fighting against food waste. This entrepreneur appeared to be a great role model as he embodied the possibility of reconciling business with sustainability: *"The founder of Phenix was a concrete illustration of a company that responds to a cause. He showed that the worlds of business and NGOs do not need to be separated"*.

Identification with a role model and the discovery of their ways of acting was made possible through authentic encounters during the "What if it were me?" sequence, the Great Witness sequence and by putting oneself in the shoes of a leader with c-UP. Positive role models and the recognition of opportunities to act are nevertheless insufficient without any form of engagement.



Step 2 - From awareness to professional engagement - investigating a sociotechnical controversy on a sustainability issue

After the induction seminar, students engaged in a second step of the process: a 3-month group project was the second stage of the Business & Sustainability seminar. Students had to organize themselves into teams of 5 to 6 students, choose a sociotechnical controversy on a sustainability topic, and organize their response collectively. While professors provided them with a methodology to investigate sociotechnical controversies, the students had to conduct a field analysis, identify and map the various stakeholders involved, and conduct interviews before their analysis of the controversy. Each class of 30 students covered 5 to 6 different controversies, on a wide range of sectors such as financial markets (green bonds), aviation or car transportation (the dark side of green vehicles), the environmental impacts of digital services (such as on-demand video), etc.

In two groups, students engaged in a specific project with Eric Duverger, setting up a transformative project for corporations called "*Convention des Entreprises pour le Climat*".

Students' reflexive narratives show that the most important moments were the interviews, which gave them a lot of hope: "*We did a lot of interviews with passionate and exciting people like Benoit Biteau, a cattle farmer and European deputy, who explained their job and their commitment. Meeting all these people made me more optimistic, even if the road to an eco-responsible system is still long*". We observe the passage from awareness of issues to understanding concrete actions associated with a sense of responsibility: "*We were aware of the stakes they represented. It was from these interviews that we were able to define what companies really need to accelerate the transition to responsible packaging.*" "*Interviews were the most interesting part of the project for me because it was really becoming concrete. We could finally see how things could really move in favour of the*

environment". *"Eric Duverger and the guests at the final presentation were really interested in the solutions we proposed [...] I felt that I was considered as a student, of course, but also as a fully-fledged adult who had a real role to play in the design of this Climate Convention."*

At the end, we observed a change in students' perception at two levels. At the personal level, students better and more consciously aligned their personal values and behaviour: *"Finally, I became aware that each of us, on our own level, can act, but especially that I can do more"; "the controversies studied by each group have inspired me to be more careful, from the energy I consume to the clothes I wear"*. Secondly, we observed a change in perception at the professional level, regarding their future role as business leaders. *"I personally realised that I wanted to be more involved in sustainable development initiatives, both during my studies and in my future career"*.

On Eric Duverger's side, the collaboration with the students was meaningful: *"We have a duty to do the groundwork, to propel the next generation. "* As he had started working on his project at the same time as the student project, it also had a significant and direct impact on him, *"I knew that it would set me in motion, but moreover, with 50 students, it gave me energy. It was a momentum hit"*. The project had a clear multiplier effect: *"The more [glass ☺] bottles we throw into the sea, the more people come back. The bottles in the sea are also thrown by the students, because they're going to have contacts. They're scouts, they're explorers."* But the most important effect is that *"students will push their future bosses towards an ecological awakening"*.

Conclusion: Towards an exploratory model of impact pedagogy

In this paper, we have analyzed the main characteristics of "Designing Tomorrow: business & sustainability" which aims to be an empowering educational seminar and field investigation in which students are invited to engage in a three-step learning trajectory. The seminar aims at raising awareness of environmental risks such as climate change by understanding their complex, systemic and potentially uncontrollable character. While fear related to an uncertain future often dominates the students' emotional trajectory after this first step, hope is often restored thanks to authentic encounters with inspiring and optimistic revolutionary managers or entrepreneurs who are transforming business to tackle climate change. The vision shared by these revolutionary leaders offers the chance to find role models with whom students can easily identify (Step 2). The field investigation offers the opportunity to commit to a collective transformative action. By interviewing key actors who could be involved in the creation of the "Convention des Entreprises pour le Climat" which aims to enroll 150 CEOs by July 2021, students definitely develop new capabilities. Throughout the process, teachers do their best to develop an authentic dialogue with the students and facilitate reflexivity during their learning process to become future sustainable leaders.

As well as the students, such a pedagogical initiative also constitutes a powerful platform to build a network of sustainability-committed professors within the school. Indeed, "Designing Tomorrow" involved 14 professors from different departments (marketing, finance, strategy, organization & management, HR, operations), all of them already concerned, but with heterogeneous levels of preliminary expertise in sustainability. Taking part in this seminar was a great opportunity for professors to share knowledge on the reality, urgency, scale and scope of the ecological emergency, and create cognitive and value alignment. The seminar played a central role by broadly infusing a shared feeling of responsibility among professors about the duty for a business school to radically rethink business and economic institutions in light of sustainability transformations. Beyond students, such a program also has an impact on our institution, as it questions the core

identity, mission and perceived values of a business school in relation to such grand challenges.



Figure 1: Impact pedagogy

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