

Designing Culture-Based Learning into a Management Course

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ABSTRACT

Today's university students learn within the context of their popular ("pop") culture environments. Viewed through that lens, higher education is a "culture-based learning product" (Young & Taylor, 2010, p 76). For training and development aligned with career-focused education, Ketter promotes "... designing activities, not content. Content is abundantly available. Designing content is not our job" (2011, p 10). This article describes and operationalizes a culture-based instructional design strategy that creates "a platform for students' voices" in a university introductory management course (Caramela, 2018). Establishing this platform positions students to move through the six stages of Bloom's Taxonomy from "remembering-defining" the problem, to "understanding-associating" management-related challenges to that problem, to "applying-experimenting" with management concepts related to the problem, to "analyzing-mind mapping" real-world relationships in management, to "evaluating-assessing" opportunities and solutions that create measurable results (TeachThought, 2017).

Keywords: culture-based learning, management education, instructional design, higher education, popular culture

ALIGNING CULTURE-BASED LEARNING TO MANAGERIAL DECISION MAKING

Hedstrom points out that the values of "collaboration, learning, openness to change, connectivity, diversity, access, flexibility, autonomy, gratitude, and understanding the meaning and purpose in what they do have all been identified as important values for millennials" (2018). Millennials are defined as individuals born after 1980 (Pew Research Center, 2015). These values can be modeled and exercised in the university classroom through culture-based learning. Young & Taylor report, "Successfully launching a culture-based learning product requires a plan of action guided by a model, framework, or guidelines" that include "developing the product, managing the product, analyzing the product and process, organizing the team, assessing the process and product, conducting training, and meeting the needs of the learner." Consideration should be given to designing "multiple pathways to learning outcomes," piloting the product in one classroom before scaling the activity (and accepting failures as part of learning), "diversifying media format," and assessing "environmental and individual contexts." Culture-based learning demands "diversified assessments" and provides a creative space for students to "identify questions not asked or answered" (p 77).

PEPSI: CREATING A CONVERSATION IN THE CLASSROOM

In applying Young & Taylor's culture-based framework, the learning objectives of an introductory management course were identified and used to create "learning capsules" that could be aligned with the pop culture context of the "Kendall Jenner for Pepsi Commercial" (2017). The goal of this commercial was to "project a global message of unity, peace and understanding," stemming from research that supports that "75% of millennials consider themselves activists" (Schultz & Diaz, 2017). The steps below identify how the Young & Taylor framework, considering the course learning objectives in the context of the commercial can be used to advance students through the six stages of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Step 1. Creating the pop culture context. The Kendall Jenner commercial offers a unique opportunity for management students to explore managerial functions, environmental forces, ethics, communication, team design, and diversity training in the classroom using a pop culture context. The commercial opens with a diverse group of millennials of all races, religions, and social ambitions participating in a peaceful protest, lifting posters with the words "Join the Conversation" and "Love." Watercutter describes, "In the 2-minute-39-second 'short film,' Jenner throws off the chains of the modeling industry by taking off her wig, then leaving a photoshoot to join a protest" (2017). The commercial has been widely criticized for its social insensitivity to destructive, life-threatening protests many have experienced that are nothing like the Pepsi Generation of which Jenner plays a part, walking up to a police officer without consequences. This social conversation offers the perfect platform for conversations, critical thinking, and evaluation in managerial decision making.

Step 2. Developing the product. In an introductory management course, students need to develop a body of knowledge or inventory of management concepts that they will apply at higher levels throughout their degrees. This phase requires that the professor allow students to watch the commercial as many times as necessary (once as a united class and then on their devices). The goal is for students to remember the feelings and influences the commercial created in their minds and hearts, and to allow students to define the managerial problems or dilemmas created. Because research shows that millennials are value-based in their decision making, the professor should expect that millennials will conduct research on reviews of the commercial on social media to align their values with those expressed by their role models (which is what they also do as consumers for whom the commercial was designed). Once students have worked through the “remembering-defining” the problem stage, the professor should advance the students to the “understanding-associating” stage to discuss how the managerial functions of planning, leading, organizing, and controlling were used to create the commercial. As a prompt, the professor could ask the students to evaluate the commercial based on how managers planned and defined the objective of the commercial, to describe how the managers organized its development in phases (using key transitions in the video as hints), to outline how the managers created a budget for the project, and to define how the managers measured the success based on social media feedback. Students may not be able to uncover research to answer each question, which will engage them in critical thinking as to the ways in which managers could have conducted the planning, leading, organizing, and controlling for the project.

Step 3. Managing the product. This phase requires students to present how environmental forces influence managerial planning. The goal of this stage of the activity is for students to “apply-experiment” with tools that managers could use to assess the external sources driving a project’s success or failure, using the commercial as the context. As a prompt, the professor should remind the students to recall the commercial’s objective as they defined it, and to identify tools that students could use to “explore-define” the various stakeholders and to benchmark competitive commercials designed to express the power of the millennial generation in affecting change through product and social choices. The professor should provide an overview of the balanced scorecard as a management tool and allow students to be creative in how they identify Pepsi Co.’s expected financial, internal, learning and growth, and customer goals related to the Kendall Jenner project. Students should be encouraged to explore Pepsi Co.’s 2017 annual report for its year in review, media highlights, its global brand character, its diversity philosophy, and its initiatives around the world to improve the lives of women and minorities. Additional resources could include advertising practitioner resources, financial and social analysts’ websites, and annual reports of leading consumer products companies including, but not limited to, foods and lifestyle brands.

Step 4. Analyzing the product and process. Ethical decision making can be used when analyzing the product (here, the commercial) and the process behind its creation. At this phase, students should begin to learn about ethical frameworks across cultures to develop tools to evaluate the importance of values in individual and organizational decision making. The professor should provide an overview of key tools used to evaluate culture, including Hofstede Insights’ models of “power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence” (2018). It is in this stage that students “analyze” and “mind-map” relationships between culture, ethics, and values in managerial decision making. Students could research the role of ethics in relating culture to managerial outcomes, as advertising managers would need to do in establishing which cultures would most likely be open-minded to a consumer strategy based on social activism.

Step 5. Assessing the process and product. This phase relates the principles of effective communication in its many forms to the values and behaviors expressed in the commercial, including a discussion of the intended meaning, the communication channels, and the perceived meaning reported by specific groups that have self-identified as champions and critics of that expression in social and mainstream media. Students should be encouraged to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of social media permanence, and the importance of testing communications with representative groups before launching a company communication in media. As a prompt, the professor could ask students to reach out to diverse groups of non-management students to generate their feedback on the commercial, and then students could develop a response that would “explain events that are important but have not been explained, dispel uncertainties by providing facts, and work to establish open communications and trust over time” as if they represented Pepsi Co. (Bateman, Snell, & Konopaske, 2017). Students should be encouraged to research how advertising agencies develop communication strategies, to design what they believe would be a more effective communication strategy, and to address how managers within the Pepsi Co. organization could have mitigated the threat of miscommunication in the commercial. Consideration should be given to exploring effective communication strategies in the variety of cultures represented in the commercial, to allow students to

learn how student-consumers in other cultures exercise their voices to affect social change (even if consumer products are not involved).

Step 6. Organizing the team. Students in this phase are exploring the fundamentals of organizational design and the potential benefits and pitfalls of each. Relating these management concepts to the Kendall Jenner commercial creates a dynamic network of students who are involved in discussing how Pepsi Co.'s creative team leveraged information sharing, idea generation, cross-functional teams, and organizational resources to develop the project. As a prompt, the professor could present the Pepsi Co. organizational chart and explain the role of mechanistic and organic designs in creating cohesiveness between self-managed teams, self-designing teams, and executive-level decision making groups. Students could be asked to design a Pepsi Co. organizational chart using an organic structure framework that articulates how communication occurs, how expertise is valued and strongly influences decision making, and how Pepsi Co. designers have used past results of advertising campaigns to think in a disciplined way about past successes and failures (Bateman et al.). At this stage, students begin to move toward "evaluating-assessing" gaps in understanding between what the commercial was designed to communicate and how the market responded, to identify where the team could have changed its organizational approach to decision making.

Step 7. Conducting training and meeting the needs of the learner. This is the phase in which students move beyond "evaluating-assessing" and begin to design opportunities and solutions that tie directly back to the balanced scorecard, keeping in mind that "customer intimacy" defined as "exceptional service" and "effective solutions" should be the goal of a consumer products company (Bateman et al.). At this stage, students will pull together all their work for the project and design a presentation for the class that provides training on Steps 2-6. Each student group will position itself as a consulting firm addressing Pepsi Co. following the release of the Kendall Jenner commercial. For Step 2, students present the commercial frame-by-frame and identify evidence of Pepsi Co.'s core values on diversity as expressed in the creative execution of the ad ("remembering-defining" stage). Then the students to move to the "understanding-associating" stage of Step 3 to explain how the managerial functions of planning, leading, organizing, and controlling were used to create the commercial. In Step 4, students "analyze" and "mind map" relationships between culture, ethics, and values related to managerial decision making. In Step 5, students present effective communication strategies for the variety of cultures represented in the commercial, to express how student-consumers in other cultures exercise their voices to affect social change. For Step 6, students design an organizational chart using an organic structure framework that articulates how communication occurs, how expertise is valued and strongly influences decision making, and explain how Pepsi Co. designers have used past results of advertising campaigns to think in a disciplined way about past successes and failures (as applied in Bateman et al.). As a reflection on how this project has met the needs of the learners, students will lead discussions about how Pepsi Co. conducts diversity training and how the training could be adapted to include lessons from the recent commercial's controversies. Students will also share what they learned about managerial decision making using the commercial as a pop culture context.

CONCLUSION

Operationalizing culture-based learning by analyzing a controversial pop culture commercial creates knowledge of how communication can create a personal connection to a company, which Caramela reports is important to millennials: "If a millennial feels that they are not personally connected to their company, they likely won't stick around... so be sure to align your mission with your workers and create a platform for their voice." Applying Young & Taylor's framework to an introductory management course offers students an opportunity to design their learning experiences while achieving course learning outcomes, all with the objective of applying management concepts in order to assess, evaluate, and recommend how a leading consumer organization can increase its social impact by "developing" and "managing the product," "analyzing" and "assessing the product and process," and "organizing" and "training the team."

Culture-based learning transforms professor-delivered learning into student-driven, project based learning. Professors should answer the following questions before implementing culture-based learning: "Do you want learners to explore, listen, share, reflect, interact with the instructor, interact with one another, or some combination of these? Or do you want to find new means of continuing classroom conversations or conducting formative or summative assessment activities?" (Bozarth, 2012, p 65). If the goal is to design learner-focused "inquiry-based"

discovery scaffolded with “open-ended” questions that drive “ongoing” continual learning, professors should begin with a “driving question and challenge” that “engages” students in “problem solving” in a “contextualized real-world” scenario (Sam Houston State University, 2018, citing West Virginia Department of Education’s PBL Tools). Culture-based learning can leverage unlimited pop culture examples to deliver meaningful, student-driven learning opportunities in this market-driven culture.

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