Bridging Theory and Practice through Immersion: Innovations for Teaching Business and Human Rights at Business Schools

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I. Teaching Business and Human Rights at Business Schools

Teaching business and human rights (BHR) at a business school requires instructors to make the case for human rights from a business perspective. Business students who are already primed by a narrow mainstream business paradigm with a focus on profit maximization need answers to the question of how a corporation can reconcile its core business with a human rights commitment.[1] To that end, business students need examples from daily management practice that illustrate the business relevance of human rights issues, their urgency and complexity, as well as the challenges associated with resolving these issues. In the context of business school culture, business students are particularly keen to learn from real-world cases that allow them to develop actual management skills. It is through these concrete examples that business school students can begin to reflect on the existing business paradigm and broaden their understanding on why respecting human rights makes good business sense.[2]

Several business schools are currently experimenting with innovative teaching approaches that immerse students to various degrees in a real-world BHR scenario. Immersion can take many forms but in all cases, immersive teaching approaches turn students from external analysts into active decision-makers in scenarios that have *both* a business and a human rights component. These immersive approaches go beyond inviting business practitioners as guest speakers and discussing business case studies with students, which are both standard teaching approaches at business schools. Immersive teaching approaches are also different from consulting projects that students

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[1] Ken McPhail, 'Human rights should be on the MBA curriculum', *Financial Times* (18 March 2014), https://www.ft.com/content/21f1fa54-8aa1-11e3-9465-00144feab7de (accessed 27 September 2017).

[2] Dorothée Baumann-Pauly and Michael Posner, 'Making the Business Case for Human Rights: An Assessment' in Dorothée Baumann-Pauly and Justine Nolan (eds.), *Business and Human Rights: From Principles to Practice* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2016) 11.

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take on, for example in the context of human rights clinics.[3] As consultants, students remain external observers to a scenario and their recommendations are typically non-consequential for the client. Clinics that focus on human rights alone are also not designed to consider the whole range of challenges a company is facing in a specific business context. Instead, clinics produce suggestions for how to improve corporate human rights performance without necessarily embedding human rights compliance within a general framework of good management practice.

Immersive scenarios are typically based on real-world cases but they are controlled by the instructor to optimize the learning experience. As such, immersion as a teaching technique is different from the immersion that students experience through internships at companies. An immersive teaching scenario empowers groups of students to make decisions that go beyond internship responsibilities and the instructor has the option to modify the challenge depending on the students' learning progress. While in most cases the scenarios play out in the classroom, in some cases students leave the classroom and spend time in the field.

In immersive teaching techniques, students need to acquire a comprehensive understanding of business incentives, opportunities and risks. Human rights risks and opportunities are then just one of the many factors to consider for strategic decision-making. Integrating human rights aspects into business management scenarios creates a more realistic setting for discussing the intersection of human rights with business.[4] From my own experience of teaching BHR at business schools, it is this integration of human rights aspects into management scenarios that teases out the tough dilemmas of respecting human rights in highly competitive and fast-paced business environments. In learning how to resolve these dilemmas in a way that is principled but not ignorant of business realities, it is helpful if students have something at stake other than just their grade. Immersive techniques create these stakes in different ways: by assigning roles and perspectives that have to be defended publicly in class, and by creating urgency to make decisions from these assigned perspectives that have complex consequences for other participants. From experience, students are highly engaged in such classes, which according to the interviewed instructors also positively affects the quality of the work they eventually submit for evaluation.

Immersive approaches have been used successfully in language education[5] and to some degree in ethics teaching.[6] Immersion can therefore be considered a potentially powerful approach to transfer skills from a classroom setting to actual application in strategic decision-making situations in corporate practice.

This piece highlights three types of these novel immersive teaching approaches that are currently in use at different business schools: (1) role-plays and debates, (2) scenario courses, and (3) immersion through field studies that go beyond a BHR focus. The degree of immersion varies but in all cases students become active participants in a

[3] Joanne Bauer, 'Equipping Professionals for the Next Challenges: The Design and Results of a Multidisciplinary Business and Human Rights Clinic' (2017) 2:2 *Business and Human Rights Journal* 359.

[4] Carolyn Y Nicholson and Michelle DeMoss, 'Teaching Ethics and Social Responsibility: An Evaluation of Undergraduate Business Education at the Discipline Level' (2009) 84:4 *Journal of Education for Business* 213.

[5] Hector Hammerley, 'The Immersion Approach: Litmus Test of Second Language Acquisition through Classroom Communication' (2011) 71:4 *The Modern Language Journal* 395.

[6] Nicholson and DeMoss, note 4; David B Strohmetz and Anne A Skleder, 'The Use of Role-Play in Teaching Research Ethics: A Validation Study' (2016) 19:2 *Teaching of Psychology* 106.

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business scenario with a human rights component. The piece then discusses the challenges of assessing the impact of teaching BHR at business schools and concludes by proposing an agenda for future research on the effectiveness of different teaching approaches to human rights.

II. Teaching Through Immersion

A. Role-plays and Debates

Several instructors at business schools have used role-plays as a way to make students assume different stakeholder perspectives. I have used role-plays to replicate scenarios in which companies must manage a crisis in light of a media exposé and/or a non-governmental organization (NGO) campaign. I have also used role-plays to demonstrate the relevance of multi-stakeholder meetings for informed corporate decision-making. In these cases, groups of students are assigned different stakeholder roles, and are given around one hour to formulate a position that is then presented in a multi-stakeholder meeting where all groups get together to discuss the scenario. Moderated by the instructor, students in the meeting must make a definitive decision about how to move forward within the time limit. Playing out the meeting under time pressure immerses students in the actual pros and cons for different paths forward and helps them to understand what is at stake. Student evaluations have shown that they found this element of the course very useful for integrating all students in class discussions. It was also highlighted as the semester's 'eye-opener', because the scenario enabled students to fully experience a typical business dilemma situation.

Slightly less immersive than role-plays, but no less heated, is the approach of using staged debates. My colleagues at New York University Stern School of Business (NYU Stern) use recent news stories to highlight the topicality of human rights challenges for business. For every session, individual students need to prepare an assigned stakeholder perspective for a brief debate that runs for about 15 minutes in each class. Unlike the discussion of a case study that has all the facts laid out, news stories are often still evolving: facts are not fully established and different opinions in news reports make assessing the situation more challenging – and more realistic for future managers who will have to manage such challenges under uncertainty. Topics in past years have included discussions about whether western fashion retailers should contribute financially to repairing factories in Bangladesh, whether a company like Facebook should enter China given the country's restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, or whether US oil and gas companies should enter countries like Sudan or Libya, given the poor human rights record of these countries.[7] These topics from the news make students realize that BHR issues are mainstream and managers must be prepared to speak on them.

B. Scenario Courses

A step beyond role-plays or debates, which are conducted within one teaching session, are entire courses that build on one scenario. For example, the Institute for Business Ethics at

[7] The instructor, Michael Posner, provided unpublished course material to the author for the purpose of writing this article.

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the University of St Gallen in Switzerland started offering this kind of a semester-long course for the first time in spring 2017.[8] Their description of the course objectives states:

> This course takes a practical approach to understanding prevailing issues at the intersection of business and human rights. Its goal is to give students a sense of the challenges, problems and dilemmas that business and human rights professionals face when tackling such issues, and of the complexity of coming up with viable and practicable solutions that include a variety of stakeholders with different and often conflicting views and interests.[9]

The practical approach was based on a scenario that built mostly on actual facts around the organization of a mega-sporting event. The instructors added some fictional elements to enhance the tensions in the scenario while facilitating other aspects of the case. The objective was to weave multiple aspects into a dense scenario that makes such a case challenging for companies committed to respect human rights to resolve, while controlling some of the unforeseen internal and external developments that could entirely change a business scenario in the real world.

The course was co-taught by a business ethics professor and a corporate practitioner who has been working as a BHR manager for a multinational corporation for several decades. Both instructors considered the complementarity of their perspectives to be a particular advantage for supervising students' projects. Based on their diverse networks, the instructors also provided students with civil society and business contacts that they could interview to gather further information.

In the first session, students jointly talked through a classic BHR case study to learn about some basic developments in the field. The instructors also provided background reading and support to student groups throughout the semester. At the mid-semester mark, the students met with each other and the instructors for an initial debate, and used these exchanges and feedback from instructors to continue developing their strategy.

According to the instructors, the final presentations and reports of students showed an impressive learning curve from the mid-semester presentation. Students reported that they greatly enjoyed the targeted interaction with experts from the instructors' network that enhanced their understanding of the complexity of the challenges. For future classes, the instructors plan to provide even more opportunities for students to interact throughout the semester via an electronic communications platform.

C. Immersion through Field Studies that Go beyond a BHR Focus

At NYU Stern, MBA students are able to embark on the so-called 'Stern Signature Projects' – experiential platforms that provide unique applied learning opportunities. Designed to tackle complex questions and leverage system-level thinking to help solve real-world business problems, these projects lend themselves to BHR topics. NYU Stern has designated funds for Signature Projects and NYU Stern's Center for Business and Human Rights applied for these funds to test an immersive teaching approach.

[8] The author interviewed the instructors of the class, Florian Wettstein and Ron Popper, to gain insights into their teaching that go beyond the published course outline.

[9] University of St Gallen, 'Course and Examination Fact Sheet: Spring Semester 2017', http://tools.unisg.ch/Handlers/public/CourseInformationSheet.ashx?Semester=FS17&EventNumber=8,619,1.00 (accessed 27 September 2017).

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In the spring of 2016, NYU Stern's Center led a project that took a group of five MBA students to Nairobi in Kenya to advise Artisan Fashion – a company that connects artisanal garment manufacturers with the global garment supply chain. The connection to Artisan Fashion was made through a senior advisor to the Center who has been working as a human rights expert in the garment supply chain for decades. The artisans who work for Artisan Fashion use traditional craftwork to create handbags and other accessories for western luxury brands. The company employs and trains artisans to ensure that the skills and opportunities they provide remain in the community.

Far from a traditional business consulting project, this Stern Signature Project is in fact inextricably infused with human rights considerations, as they are outlined in industry-specific human rights standards such as the Fair Labor Association's Workplace Code of Conduct.[10] These five students spoke with the artisans to understand their needs and assessed the company's business model with its social core. Throughout the semester, the students maintained regular communications with the company to understand their evolving work. At the end of the semester, the students produced a business plan that incorporated human rights principles to bolster and streamline the company's operations, concluding that these principles support its long-term sustainability. In suggesting a business promotion strategy, the MBA students highlighted the company's longstanding record of respect for the human rights of the artisans and leveraged this as an important advantage in a competitive marketplace. They also recommended that one of the artisans be elevated formally to a leadership role within management and that the company could establish a non-profit organization to increase training and outreach to the wider community.

These structural overhauls will take time to implement, but the feedback from Artisan Fashion to the plan was very positive. Students also remarked that the integration of human rights made the business-focused project particularly challenging but also rewarding for them. It created multi-dimensional concerns that drove them to carefully consider all of the affected stakeholders, learn about running an export business from East Africa, and think creatively to arrive at new solutions that benefit the company as well as the community.

This double objective in the project and the direct interaction with the artisans and the company that linked the artisans to the global value chain created an authentic immersive experience in line with what students might be asked to do as future business consultants.

If the project gets NYU funding again, the next cohort of students could perhaps help Artisan Fashion to implement the business plan set by the pioneering cohort or replicate the experience with other artisanal-based small businesses that could benefit from business consultants that consider human rights as integral to business.

III. Evaluating the Impact of Teaching BHR: Some Reflections

This piece has offered initial indications about the usefulness of employing immersive techniques to teach BHR courses at business schools. Role-plays, debates, scenario courses and field projects propel students to develop the skills that are needed for managing human rights challenges.

[10] Fair Labor Association, 'Workplace Code of Conduct', http://www.fairlabor.org/sites/default/files/fla_code_of_conduct.pdf (accessed 27 September 2017).

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However, systematic impact studies of teaching human rights to business students are not yet available. BHR classes at business schools are still rare,[11] and measuring the effects of different teaching approaches in an ideal setting would require a comparison of longitudinal data of decisions made by managers who have been exposed to BHR aspects in their business education, and managers that have not been. Needless to say, given the range of possible intervening variables in such studies, gathering data will be complicated, and controlling for different teaching approaches within such a sample would complicate the research design further. Studies on business ethics, however, have highlighted that (1) ethics can be taught,[12] and that (2) the type of teaching approach matters.[13] Therefore, whether students are able to apply the skills they practised in the classroom also depends on the teaching technique, and immersive approaches are promising in that the scenarios are designed to make students experience what managers would experience in real-life situations.

Course evaluations can also provide first indications for what students found helpful for grasping all dimensions of a topic. According to the instructors interviewed for this study, immersive teaching methods consistently receive positive reviews by students. From the feedback provided and the observations that I made in the classroom, further research should be conducted on the role of evoking emotions in enhancing lasting learning impact. Human rights violations are taking away from what makes us human. Being part of a scenario in which a business potentially violates human rights can get under our skin. Feeling these effects through immersive teaching approaches may demonstrate to students that human rights issues are not fringe business considerations, but that these are the issues that keep managers up at night.

With increasing popularity of BHR classes at business schools, the question what kind of teaching approaches are most effective in capacitating future business leaders to manage human rights issues deserves further attention. Assessing the impact of different teaching techniques may also lead to a broader reflection on how future business leaders are taught at business schools. Fully integrating human rights aspects in the core curriculum of business schools through existing classes in marketing, accounting, strategic management or finance might render stand-alone BHR classes obsolete. In terms of capacitating future managers, integrating BHR topics throughout the business curriculum would certainly provide the most realistic immersion.

[11] A recent survey of the BHR Teaching Forum indicated that business schools to date teach mostly corporate social responsibility and only very few teach BHR specifically, but the number of specific BHR classes is growing.

[12] Scott David Williams and Todd Dewett, 'Yes, You Can Teach Business Ethics: A Review and Research Agenda' (2016) 12:2 *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 109.

[13] Ronald R Sims and Edward L FeltonJr, 'Designing and Delivering Business Ethics Teaching and Learning' (2006) 63:6 *Journal of Business Ethics* 297.

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