

Utilizing SOCIALLY RESPONSIVE Knowledge

By Lisa Jones Christensen and Jennifer Boehme Kumar

RESEARCH in management education is severely lacking in its focus on the delivery to those living in extreme poverty. To date, most of the work has not addressed the issue, or it has addressed it from the perspective of replicating Western programs for wealthier international elites. In order to accomplish delivery, we can utilize the three-part concept of knowledge domains. I report here one instance where management educators used classroom training and international travel to reinforce all three domains while also creating change in the lives of the students and of those in poverty. The case study also portrays a classroom exercise eventually growing into a stand-alone nonprofit organization. The lessons from that experience illustrate new roles for management education in—and for people in—conditions of extreme poverty.

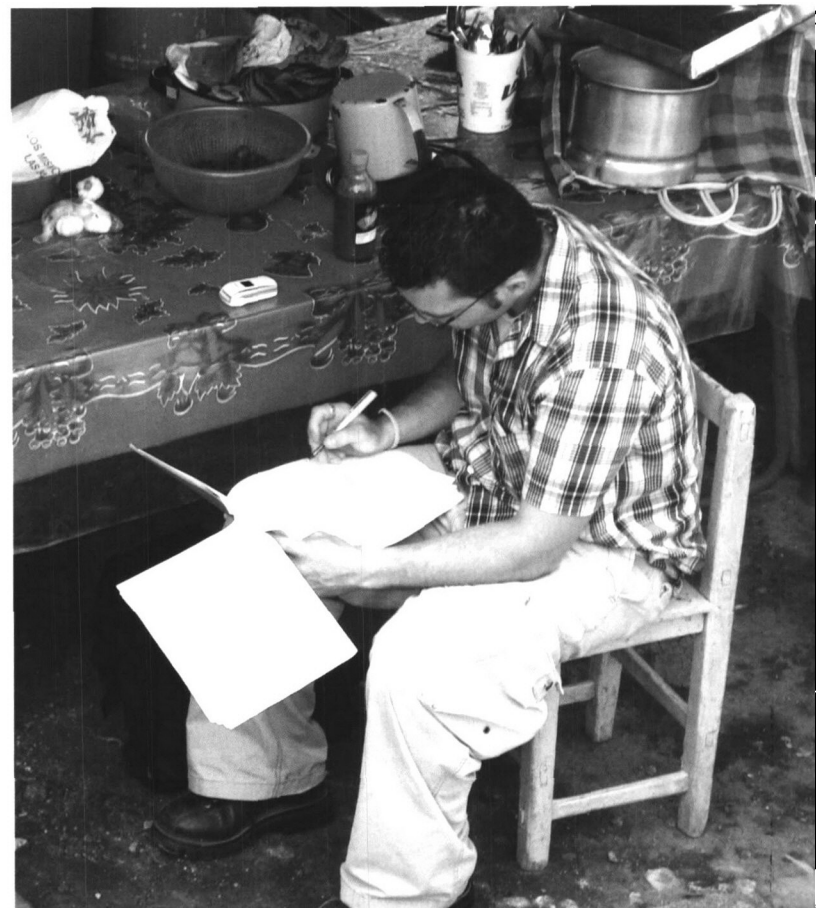
Knowledge Domains: Three Types

Irwin Altman describes one approach that faculty members in higher education can use when they have an interest

in (re)shaping how students relate to social issues and to future societal needs.¹ From his psychology expertise, he outlines three domains of knowledge that he suggests must be developed and utilized simultaneously in order to “educate the good citizen of the future:”

- *foundational* knowledge: content, theories, history, and methodology of a discipline
- *professional* knowledge: practitioner skills and content, often vocationally focused, of a field
- *socially responsive* knowledge: first-hand experience and understanding of issues in a society

Altman reiterates that the triad is intertwined and that all three are co-dependent—in particular, socially responsive knowledge cannot stand apart from the other two forms. He suggests that schools already excel at providing foundational and professional knowledge, but they do not excel at generating or utilizing socially responsive knowledge. We suggest that when Western students use foundational and professional knowledge while performing service



learning projects in less advantaged contexts, the lessons they gather constitute socially responsive knowledge.

HELP International, or HELP, is an excellent case study of this interaction of domains, and the

MFIs were open to partnerships, and what relief and humanitarian aid was required by the local impoverished families.

Additionally, class members organized a Honduras culture team

included a clause whereby FINCA would manage all of the new banks after HELP volunteers left the country, thus ensuring future sustainability. Therefore, the presence and subsequent departure of HELP did not create dependencies in the community or within FINCA.

Students worked with managers of microbusinesses by participating in projects that entailed teaching business, language, and computer skills to individuals or groups of adult learners. Through functioning in this capacity, students and faculty learned much about teaching business skills to the extremely impoverished. Participants from that formative year learned that individuals, even young people, can have a tangible effect on the lives of others. They also learned the importance of preparation, cultural understanding, financial management, and business skill acquisition for the volunteers and the recipients.

Clearly, the overall experience incorporated all three of knowledge domains. By the time the students left the program they had the opportunity to utilize their *foundational* knowledge of accounting and inventory management principles and their *professional* knowledge about content delivery and negotiation skills to develop a proficiency in acting on a problem in a *socially responsive*, efficacious way. They also generated socially responsive knowledge as they learned about processes and behaviors that did or did not “work” in the context of extreme poverty.

In addition to providing financial and emotional benefits to the Honduran people, many students report that their work with HELP informed subsequent life decisions and behaviors. An extreme example of this is the case of one volunteer

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study illustrates lessons learned for providing management education to the poorest.

The First Year: Response to Crisis

During the close of 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated much of Central America. Dr. Warner Woodworth, a professor of organizational behavior at the Marriott School of Management at Brigham Young University, responded to the crisis by creating an open elective course entitled *Becoming a Global Change Agent*. From the outset, the class was planned as an action research experience aimed at mobilizing college students and training them in specific ways to change the world. It was also created as a way to organize teams who would help plan trips and/or travel to Honduras during the summer of 1999 as relief and reconstruction volunteers—with a focus on creating microfinance projects.

The college course was a participatory experience with a heavy emphasis on the potential of microfinance to help people rebuild lives. Overall, seventy-nine students participated. Class participants formed teams to plan the logistics of going to Honduras and to explore what microfinance institutions (MFIs) were currently in the country, which

to teach volunteers about local norms, values, and technical terms. They established a public relations team to obtain media attention, a fundraising team to help generate money, and a microcredit resource team to research competing microfinance methodologies and eventually train everyone in rudimentary techniques of village banking. The class was designed to allow students significant autonomy in almost every aspect of organization building, and the students voted to name the new organization HELP Honduras (**H**elping **E**liminate **P**overty in Honduras).

During the course of the summer of 1999, forty-six students traveled to and served in five regions in Honduras. Each student was committed to volunteer eight weeks or more. The students identified and approached a microfinance organization as a partner, and with the nonprofit organization FINCA International, they worked during the summer to jointly create new communal banks. Between founding new banks and recapitalizing old banks, the students created one hundred new microbanks. HELP Honduras's microcredit efforts created approximately eight hundred jobs, benefiting nearly four thousand individuals.² The partnership terms with FINCA

who served in El Salvador for one summer prior to attending a prestigious culinary institute. After his summer with HELP, he decided to change his career focus in favor of doing something to more directly contribute to poverty elimination. He subsequently started sponsoring the education of a Salvadoran student, and he altered his own educational plans in favor of pursuing a JD/MBA degree. Currently, he works in Tanzania as a clerk involved with the Rwandan genocide trials. Obviously, not all volunteers are affected so markedly, but this case illustrates

the potential implications of service-learning projects like HELP.

The Growth of HELP International as an NGO

HELP has expanded its operations every year since its inception, and management has incorporated it into a nonprofit organization operating under the name HELP International. From the beginning in 1999, HELP has enabled more than five hundred students to travel in a combined service and learning capacity more than thirteen regions in nine countries.

Table 1 indicates the number of

volunteers and the countries where they have served, taught, and expanded microfinance.

Typical projects volunteers employ in delivering management education to these participants include the following:

- Weekly mini-business lessons given as a stand-alone project or during a microcredit bank meeting
- Six-week business courses that meet three times a week
- One- to three-day special business-topic classes given as workshops
- One-on-one personalized consulting with microentrepreneurs
- Business plan creation courses
- Impact assessments for local MFIs

During the last nine years, students and faculty mentors have returned from participating in these interventions with significant insights about what would improve the delivery of business and management education in universities in the United States and in impoverished communities where HELP operates. HELP management collects these insights as part of every volunteer's exit interview.

Lessons Learned

It is important to clarify that the observations about key lessons were made in the context of delivering *informal* education to large groups (typically comprised of twelve to forty women or larger mixed gender groups) of fragmented, extremely poor, and often illiterate microentrepreneurs, small business owners, and managers.

Table 2 provides a simple list of practices that HELP management has consistently seen succeed or fail in disadvantaged contexts across multiple continents.

**Table 1: HELP HISTORY:
COUNTRIES SERVED AND NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS**

Year	Countries Served	Number of Volunteers
1999	Honduras	47
2000	Honduras El Salvador Peru Venezuela	72
2001	Honduras El Salvador Peru	33
2002	El Salvador Guatemala Bolivia	47
2003	El Salvador Guatemala Brazil	49
2004	El Salvador Guatemala	50
2005	El Salvador Guatemala Thailand	143
2006	El Salvador Guatemala Uganda	52

What Doesn't Work

HELP leaders have found that for most extremely poor students a formal classroom environment is intimidating. The term *formal classroom* refers to attempts to use a local college or university infrastructure (i.e., rows of chairs, podiums, microphones, and large and possibly intimidating buildings) as the primary place for teaching. Using formal classrooms at the outset can lead to difficulty in recruiting or to high levels of attrition after recruitment.

Instructors often mistakenly assume that each class participant needs his or her own materials. HELP leaders have found that this assumption leads to spending misallocations and precludes attempting team-based learning models. It can also lead to teaching delays as instructors wait until materials are collected, copied, or are otherwise available.

Students in extremely disadvantaged contexts do not necessarily have expectations of having their own materials, nor are they always

comfortable with an influx of materials at the outset of classes. Instead, they are often quite familiar with models of learning that require taking turns with materials, watching others use materials, and sharing—or that require doing without. For example, when students learn about inventory management, they work without calculators or they take turns using the calculators. They often pass around a clipboard to record ledger entries. These students are typically patient while they wait, and they tend to learn from the entries of others.

What Works

HELP management discovered that alternate teaching environments—like the outdoors, churches, work facilities, and homes—have yielded significant success in terms of retention, recruitment, and demand. HELP instructors have found that eventual migration to more formal classrooms (particularly those in local schools utilized during evenings) is possible after a reputation for

nonintimidating methods has spread throughout the community.

Other positive techniques are to use experiential methods, such as simulation games or role playing, that tie student life experiences to business or management topics.³ Usually, using these methods allows instructors to teach compelling business concepts first and then introduce formal names and theories later.

For example, in teaching the theoretical concept of separate entities in business practice, HELP instructors talk to students about their struggles to keep family members away from their business merchandise. Participants can understand and elaborate on this problem from their shared experience, and they can talk together about possible options to keep the entities separate. But they rarely grasp the concept when instructors use Western tactics and begin discussions with the theory of separate entities. HELP management learned that with experiential methods, instructors can more easily move to



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Table 2: ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTING U.S. MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN DISADVANTAGED CONTEXTS

Western Practices That Do Not Translate Well	Formal classroom environments early in educational process
	Leading with theory-based introductions
	Assuming that each student needs his or her own materials
	English-language instruction
	Screening based on literacy
Adjusted Practices That Do Translate Well	Alternate teaching environments (outside, in homes, smaller classes, etc.)
	Experiential methods (games and role plays)
	Teaching concepts first and theories later (or never)
	Tailoring educational content by geographic location and according to local cultural mores
	Checking assumptions that teachers and learners have about the role and motive of profit maximization
	Revisiting biases about student motivation

other business development topics. In this example, the next topic is usually a discussion of separate bookkeeping for business and family enterprises.

Another tactic that has proven successful across multiple contexts is tailoring educational methods to geographic location and/or cultural biases. For example, HELP instructors found that urban residents demonstrate an understanding of business concepts in ways that are quite similar to what one might expect from a typical Western college student. These urban students in developing countries tend to quickly understand concepts, such as negotiation techniques or economies of scale and scope, and to more quickly apply these concepts in their own businesses. For example, HELP volunteers in Uganda found that teaching marketing principles in an urban or semi-urban setting was

fairly easy. Participants in the class could cite examples of techniques they had seen that were effective or not effective because they were accustomed to seeing and interacting with multiple forms of marketing.

In contrast, a HELP volunteer teaching in a very rural setting, where many of the students had little interaction with marketing and rarely traveled out of their small village, reported that the concepts were difficult for many participants to grasp. For instance, when HELP volunteers asked pig farmers how they could let others know they were selling pigs, they struggled to find any other option than simply telling their neighbors that they sold pigs. These class participants had not been previously exposed to other types of marketing.

Generally speaking, HELP

instructors have consistently found that rural participants learned more slowly than their urban counterparts and that business concepts must be taught differently in extremely rural areas. Thus, simply being primed to adjust content by geography has improved the teaching.

The final two techniques that have improved the teaching of business concepts to the extremely poor relate to considering instructor biases. In the West, we encourage creativity and industry and tend to correlate these skills with increased success in business and management. However, by using games to teach business skills in developing contexts, HELP has repeatedly found that players who show high levels of creativity and industry in the game do not necessarily automatically have the skills or mindset to translate that creativity





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This paper—with its grounding in the model of knowledge domains and examples of socially responsive knowledge generated in such settings—seeks to inform others as they refine the role of management education in development interventions. We hope this paper benefits researchers and practitioners as they attempt to increase the self-reliance of students living in such settings. **ESR**

UNDERSTANDING *the participants'* *perspectives is key to using business knowledge* *for maximum positive effect.*

and industry to their businesses. The games have illustrated that students possess the skills, but instructors need to take extra care in translating the game lessons to real-life behavior.

Some students who were highly successful in the context of games still claimed that their skills could not help them in their real lives because they believed that being poor was their fate. Therefore, HELP volunteers learned they needed to understand the students' perspectives on poverty and alter their lessons to work within that context. This finding serves as a critical reminder that not everyone learns by the same method.

Instructors may also need to adjust their mindset concerning assumed students' motives. They should note that a bias in training towards the profit-making motive can affect the holistic picture of student lives. Participants are not always primarily driven by a strong profit motive because business for them is also interwoven with family and cultural concerns. Thus, they often choose to adjust their profit margins

depending on their customer instead of always charging the highest price.

Instructors may also need to help students see the long-term implications of some of their preferences. For example, many of the people HELP teaches grow cash crops for exportation. The land is fertile and yields cash crops to sell in foreign markets. However, instead of using part of the land for growing vegetables for their own families, they use all of the land for cash crops and then use the income to purchase similar or less nutritious products from the local market. Situations such as these illustrate the responsibility of teachers to understand the holistic view of students' lives. Clearly, understanding the participants' perspectives is key to using business knowledge for maximum positive effect.

Conclusion

As researchers and practitioners expand the role of management education to include new and atypical stakeholders in developing country contexts, many questions and challenges remain to be answered.

Endnotes

1 Irwin Altman, "Higher Education and Psychology in the Millennium," *American Psychologist* 51, no. 4 (1996): 371–378.

2 Warner W. Woodworth, "Microcredit in Post-Conflict, Conflict, Natural Disaster, and Other Difficult Settings" (Paper commissioned by the Microcredit Summit Campaign in 2006). (Based on the statistic that in Honduras, one job typically supported five people.)

3 See John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1938/1997) and David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984) for more information on experiential learning.

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