

Promoting Learning & Discipline

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

BUSINESS: A POOR MODEL FOR LEARNING

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Using business as a model for learning is disastrous.

I received the following in a recent e-mail.

Imagine what schools would be like if every single school in our country were trained and empowered to use the *Raise Responsibility System*. Wow! I'm just so confused as to why President Bush, who started "No Child Left Behind," pushes school ratings.

You are not the only one confused. Government, business, and even education leaders often make the gross mistake of comparing schooling to business and using a business metaphor for learning.

Schools are referred to as workplaces, students as customers, and performance is measured in terms of accountability. Equating young people's learning processes with what adults do to make money is a false equation. Using a business model for learning is a practice which has been described by the comic strip character Dagwood Bumstead: "You know, that makes a lot of sense if you don't think about it."

THE PURPOSES OF SCHOOL AND BUSINESS ARE DIFFERENT

The basic purpose of business is to survive. Even in graduate business courses which teach that one purpose of business is to serve, the fact remains that if there is no profit, the business will eventually fail.

Survival is not a factor in schooling. Society finds ways--be they public, private, or a combination thereof--to educate its young. The purpose of schooling is to promote understanding, make meaning, and perpetuate and improve society. Preparing students to live successful lives certainly includes some of the necessary skills and characteristics essential in business. However, the fact that some of the same skills are used does not mean that the skills taught in school are taught *for* purposes of business.

THE PRODUCT IS DIFFERENT

Businesses produce *products*. The product may be tangible or intangible and in the form of information, services, or goods.

Learning is a *process*, not a product. Even if students were to be considered products, the product would be their education. Schools educate and businesses train. The term “training” is not often used when referring to K-12 education. Schools do not train for specific information dissemination as do businesses, nor are students trained to provide services to others, nor are they trained to produce goods for use or for consumption. Training is used for areas that are vocational in nature.

In a business transaction, the customer is clearly identified. This is not the case in education. The customer consists of parents (especially in this age of school choice), the society at large (since students are members), other institutions of learning (where students often need to qualify), and future employers. In business, *only* the customer need *live with the product*; however, the people who live with the results of schooling are the parents and others with whom the learner interacts.

Business can control the components of its product--what will go into making a product. Schools do not have this luxury; they (at least the public schools) have no discretionary power to determine or control the “raw materials.” Besides, students are not assembled according to well-established specifications. Schools must individualize education for many students.

Business has the opportunity and even the obligation for recalls. No such possibility exists for schools. Clearly, comparing the building of people to building products is a faulty comparison.

THE PEOPLE ARE DIFFERENT

Students are young people and, as such, are different from adults. When juvenile courts were established, the legal system acknowledged that childhood is different from adulthood. Vast amounts of psychological, social, developmental, medical, and brain research have demonstrated that children and youth are different from adults. Few parents--whether in government, business, or education--would ever consider treating their own eight-year-old old as an eighteen-year-old.

THE TASKS ARE DIFFERENT

The nature of the work differs. Business has to do with providing a product or service to others. Schooling has to do with personal and social growth.

THE FUNDING AND COMPENSATION FACTORS ARE DIFFERENT

In business, the person who pays derives the benefit. This is not the case in education. The person who is most directly involved--the learner--does not pay for education. In addition, even though businesses and other agencies contribute to the support of schools, the primary source of public education is the general society--not private funds.

Also, and this may not be apparent to those who equate learning with business, *money is a satisfier--not a motivator*. Giving a person more money rarely produces more work. Money does not usually make a person work harder. Take yourself as an example. If you were given more money, would you work harder than you are now? If a chief executive officer (CEO) of a business were given more compensation, do you think he or she would work harder? Money is compensation, and unless a person is being paid by piecework or is on commission, money will not often motivate him to work harder.

Students do not receive money for learning. Besides, giving money for learning would be a mistake. External rewards alter motivation and diminish creativity, two of the most powerful incentives for learning.

In business, if a worker does not perform satisfactorily, the employment, along with the compensation, is removed. Public schools do not fire students or prevent their continued attendance.

THE SUCCESS FACTOR IS DIFFERENT

In business, success on the job often requires initiative, flexibility, and teamwork. No defense is given here for not employing similar approaches in schools. However, that is not currently the case in most schools. Schooling is administered in a competitive manner. Grades, rankings, and other evaluation techniques are largely based on pitting students against each other and militate against initiative, flexibility, and teamwork.

Outcomes in the business world can be objectively measured. Units manufactured and sold, the number of customers returning, and the number of retained clients can all be objectively measured. This is not the case in learning; outcomes cannot be objectively measured. Even if they could be, the evaluation instruments currently available could indicate only an insignificant amount of learning that had been acquired--either in quality or quantity.

In this regard, businesses do not set up evaluation instruments that mandate only a fifty percent (50%) success factor. It is interesting to note

that educational leaders follow the ideas of business and government leaders. But these leaders would never consider evaluating the success of workers on any kind of an instrument where, by design, half would fall below the average. Yet, this is what schools do when standardized tests are administered. Not only do half of the students fall below the average, so do half of the schools. No other institution would operate in this way--a poignant, but unfortunate, further differentiation.

THE PROCEDURES AND TIME FACTORS ARE DIFFERENT

A manager who oversees employees, an administrator who is accountable for a project or department, or a business executive who is responsible for the success and survival of the business operate differently from a teacher. The teacher's charge is to impart information, foster comprehension, develop communication skills, and build behavior to promote a civil society. Therefore, a slow learner is treated differently from a fast learner. Various activities are assigned according to the students' skills and abilities. Because schools aim at attending to students' needs, flexibility of time is incorporated. In contrast to schools, business uses procedures which focus on production and are usually under strict time constraints.

Finally, business primarily deals in the present. Schools deal primarily with the future.

CONCLUSION

Learning is learning; it is not business. Comparing learning to business is not only a poor metaphor, it is a false one. Just because business and learning share attributes of efforts and skills, it is unwise to compare them for the reasons listed. We would be well served to call attention to and refute the comparison whenever made.

A much more effective approach than using ratings, rankings, and competition would be to use collaboration. This approach could still allow accountability but without the disadvantages inherent in competition. One such approach is described in the article, "How to Achieve 100 Per Cent Student Participation" at <http://teachers.net/gazette/FEB02/marshall.html>.

Learn how to use internal motivation to promote both responsibility and learning by using concepts of **Stephen Covey** (proaction), **William Glasser** (noncoercion), **W. Edwards Deming** (collaboration and empowerment), and **Abraham Maslow** (hierarchy and autonomy) as described at <http://www.MarvinMarshall.com>

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