

Leveraging Partnerships with Local Companies as a Method of Teaching Sales: A Constructivist Approach

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Purpose of study: Behavioral learning or 'teaching students how to behave' is an important challenge in a sales class. This study illustrates how constructivist learning theory contributed to the development of a redesigned sales emphasis, with a goal of improving behavioral learning and other outcomes. The redesigned emphasis comprises a single, 9 credit hour course and is now in its fourth year of being offered. Qualitative results indicate some clear benefits have resulted from this pedagogical approach, as perceived by students and employers. The study also assesses downsides of the approach, which are also important to consider when evaluating whether to pursue curriculum changes.

Method/Design and Sample: A brief survey was given to sales and marketing professionals to better understand if using constructivist learning in the sales classroom was an appropriate change. Following the change, in-depth interviews were conducted with employers who had been involved with both prior and new curriculum designs. Respondents were also selected to participate based on being familiar with sales curriculums offered by other universities. Input was also gathered from students who had completed the redesigned program and student evaluations were evaluated, comparing the new course design to the prior course design.

Results: Compared to the prior version of the sales curriculum, the redesigned curriculum appears to perform better in three important ways. First, the redesigned curriculum helped overcome three main problems that motivated the curriculum change. Second, while exceptions exist, professionals largely view the redesigned curriculum as being superior to curriculums offered at other universities in terms of four constructivist learning areas. Lastly, students seem to prefer the change, as evidenced by an improvement in instructor evaluations following the change, holding the instructor constant. A major downside of the redesign is the added time needed to logistically work with the professionals who now play a strong coaching role in the class.

Value to Marketing Educators: This redesigned curriculum can provide value to educators in a variety of ways. First, it illustrates a sales education method that helps students launch their sales careers with a significant understanding of practical sales matters. Moreover, in a public university setting where state funds are shrinking, leveraging resources from local businesses is important, and the redesigned curriculum helps building corporate partnerships. Lastly, this shift in marketing education appears to be a success in terms of student satisfaction.

Keywords: Constructivist, Corporate Partnerships, Sales Education

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In this paper we discuss an innovative redesign of a nine-credit undergraduate sales emphasis. The program redesign involved changing many aspects of the curriculum, without experimental control and without an isolated assessment of each change. Thus, our goal in this paper is not to argue for the efficacy of each curriculum change separately. Rather, our goal is to discuss the problems that motivated curriculum changes, describe four issues in a conceptual framework that guided changes, present the major changes, and evaluate changes based on comments received from employers and students. The nine credit class constitutes a sales foundations course, a sales management course, and an advanced topics in sales course. The redesign was conceptually developed five

years ago, and the redesigned emphasis is now in the fourth year of practice. One of the authors of this paper works at the 'target university' where this redesigned curriculum is now taught, and one author does not.

Prior to redesigning the sales emphasis, four faculty members at the target university had taught sales, and they identified three main problems with their existing curriculum. The three main problems involved behavioral learning, solution parity, and social development. The behavioral learning problem involved recognizing that existing curriculum focused mainly on conceptual learning, whereas sales 'knowledge' is largely behavioral (Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, & Whalen, 2013; Doyle & Roth, 1992). For example, the faculty members noted that students

often correctly state how to respond to a customer objection on an exam, but then struggle when experiencing an unanticipated objection in practice. Thus, knowledge structures appear to exist but are not activated; knowledge is not retrieved when needed during a behavioral episode.

The second problem, solution parity, involved recognizing students at the target university progressed through curriculum wanting 'right' answers or approaches to sales situations. In reality, salespeople often must solve problems in the moment; ambiguity is often high and various solutions can be pursued (Brown & Peterson, 1994; Park & Holloway, 2003; Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994; Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). Weaning students away from the desire to have a 'right answer' is difficult. The existing curriculum attempted to guide students to consider challenges that could be approached in different ways, so that students could conclude on their own that multiple solutions were often appropriate; on parity with each other.

The third problem was social development. With the prior curriculum, students seemed able to discuss sales ideas within the classroom where the audience comprised professors and other students. Yet, when discussing the same sales ideas with professionals, students seemed to lose much of their discussion ability. Essentially, students interacted less capably with seasoned professionals they did not know. In practice, new college graduates that enter sales must have this ability because sales is somewhat unique in that new graduates must interact effectively with professionals they are meeting for the first time.

INNOVATION DESIGN: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In an effort to redesign the sales emphasis, a search was made to identify a pedagogical approach suited to the problems identified above, that would also be effective if employed with Generation Y and Millennial students who take the course. Research shows that while people in these generational groups are confident and comfortable in highly structured environments, they struggle with ambiguity (Bristow, Amyx, Castleberry, & Cochran, 2011).

The curriculum improvement search ultimately led to the Constructivist Learning framework. Constructivist learning involves delivering education so that a high component of sensory input is involved; learners become very involved through interactive behaviors that enable them to 'construct' their understanding of why different solutions work, or fail to work. Constructivist learning is particularly suited to help develop behavioral knowledge, has been found useful in training behaviors under ambiguous settings, and has been used in special education settings for decades (Trent et al., 1998). With or without an explicit knowledge of the constructivist learning framework, professors who teach sales already employ some constructivist methods, such as role playing (Anderson et al., 2005; Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011; Luthy,

2000; McDonald, 2006; Widmier, Loe, & Selden, 2007). Constructivism helps support knowledge in ambiguity by encouraging open dialog and the free flow of ideas (Kim, 2005).

Peter Honebein's Constructivist Learning research discusses seven pedagogical practices associated with the constructivist method (Honebein, 1996). In an effort to assess the appropriateness of incorporating constructivist learning into the curriculum, a brief survey was given to professionals (n=24) at a local sales and marketing networking event. Results indicate that, as compared to non-sales areas, students learning sales would benefit from several of the constructivists pillars (see Appendix 1). Thus, efforts to redesign the target sales program reflect four of the seven pillars. The four Constructivist Learning practices that guided curriculum changes were the development of experiences that help construct knowledge 1) from multiple perspectives, 2) from the consideration of realistic contexts, 3) from activities that encourage ownership of the learning process, and 4) from social interactions that reinforce knowledge (Honebein, 1996, p. 11 and 12).

INNOVATION IMPLEMENTATION: THE NEW COURSE DESIGN

An effort was made to review sales programs offered by other universities, and to discuss curriculum design issues with faculty teaching sales at those universities. The effort was led by two Marketing Professors at the target university, and all faculty within the department discussed the findings. Suggestions for universities to review were provided by the Sales Education Foundation. Materials were reviewed from eight universities in depth, and six of these reviews involved getting opinions from faculty who teach sales at the respective programs. As a result of this program review effort, three added challenges were identified that appear to be fairly common to sales programs. Also, two overarching curriculum design modifications were made that address these challenges. These are tabled in Appendix 2.

As noted in the Appendix 2, the re designed sales curriculum is now delivered as one 9-credit course (rather than three separate courses) taught by a single instructor. Also, new concepts are introduced only during the first portion of the course. During the remainder of the course, experiential exercises are used that behaviorally reinforce concepts, and in a manner that supports Constructivist Learning. The new course format affords large blocks of time, because the 9 credit course meets Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for three hours each day. The inclusion of large time blocks has been found to be extremely useful in other disciplines that require a good deal of problem solving and hands-on learning, such as nursing (Orsolini-Hain & Waters, 2009). This is a shift from a typical model and does not allow students to try a single initial sales course. This shift has not been a problem at the target university, as enrollment has stayed steady. However, if this program was

implemented at a different university, and enrollment concerns existed for the initial sales course, then the 9-credit course could be supplemented with a traditional section of the initial sales course.

Two other redesign elements are worth noting. First was a decrease in the number of new concepts introduced in the redesigned course. The reduction of concepts enabled an increase in the number of hands-on activities delivered during the course, and these activities reinforce concepts viewed as having highest priority. Second, the redesign effort involved including a large number of professionals as coaches to guide hands-on activities. In the redesigned sales course, a typical semester involves approximately 25 professionals in the course. Professionals are involved in almost one third of the days that the course is taught (while they are not always present for the full three hours, 'professional presence' is very high in the redesigned course). The increase in hands-on activities and use of professionals in the classroom allowed scenarios to be constructed that better challenged students to think innovatively and to consider approaching problems from different angles. The link between such activities and development of problem solving skills has been noted in the sales literature (Brown & Peterson, 1994). Example activities include conference style sessions where students attend sessions led by professionals discussing interesting and challenging aspects of sales, field trips to local companies, role plays coached by professionals who bring real contexts to the class, a sales competition where professionals serve as judges, and other activities that involve networking and learning how to navigate the sales recruitment process. Since professionals who coach students often differ from each other in how they address situations, students gain comfort with the idea that handling a situation can be done 'correctly' in different ways (solution parity). The presence of professional coaches also helps address the social development problem, and professionals have commented that students have become more comfortable interacting with professionals as the semester progresses. For instance, students are fairly hesitant during the first interaction with professionals (early during the semester at a meet-and-greet), whereas they are much more conversational with professionals toward the conclusion of the semester, at both workshop oriented events and at an end-of-semester event that includes networking plus an overall review of the semester.

ASSESSMENT OF INNOVATION

To evaluate the success of this new sales emphasis, data was gathered in three ways for this paper. First, an interview guide was developed to gather insights from professionals; to gauge their reactions to the course redesign. Second, secondary data was reviewed that had been gathered by the college for accreditation purposes, and this data contained some qualitative student input. Lastly, student evaluations of

the course were compared, holding the instructor constant (although in some semesters the newly designed course has been team-taught, and thus some confound exists related to the specific instructor). All data sources and subsequent analysis will be discussed in more detail in this section.

A total of thirteen professionals provided input through individual depth interviews (Goldman and McDonald, 1987). Professionals were selected who had been involved with the target university's redesigned program, eleven of whom were also involved with the program prior to the redesign, and all professionals had some recent involvement with at least one other university sales program. Interviews were conducted via a mix of phone and face-to-face discussions. Appendix 3 shows the interview questions. The guide followed a wide-to-narrow funnel design (Goldman and McDonald, 1987). The first question asks interviewees to identify general strengths and weaknesses of the redesigned program. The second question asks interviewees to compare the target university redesigned program to other programs along the four constructivist learning themes. The third questions asked respondents to further evaluate the program on the constructivist learning themes, and with respect to particular course components.

Comments from eleven of the thirteen respondents were uniformly favorable; the target university program was viewed as having strengths and weaknesses, but was viewed as performing more favorably than other programs with respect to the constructivist learning areas. Interviewees were all aware that the redesigned program had involved removing some concepts from the curriculum. Interestingly, a reduced number of concepts was not raised by interviewees as a weakness. However, one weakness was cited by four of the thirteen interviewees, and that was the seemingly smaller number of students enrolled in the program. Specifically, rather than seeing students spread across different classes, professionals saw one cohort each semester. Even if the total number of students remains steady, in other programs professionals get to connect with more students in any given semester (i.e., because students take sales classes over multiple semesters). This weakness is not necessarily a pedagogical deficiency, but is a limitation in the value provided to professionals, who are interested in recruiting students.

Professionals also made some specific interesting comments about the target program, such as Interviewee-5's comment, "Engagement among students (with us) is high, pretty impressive. They are interacting ferociously, and that's unique." Another interviewee comment (Interviewee-8) was, "Your students are never afraid to start conversations and ask questions, and that differs from a lot of schools. Students at other schools are scared to ask more than, 'how are you doing today'. At other schools the students have still not gotten to a comfort level with professionals, and with your program they get to that level, and pretty quickly." These comments reflect

progress made on the social development problem. A comment that reflects gains made in solution parity was offered by Interviewee-2, "Your program does a good job with real life exposure... and connects topics from one experience to another. Students see there is more than one way to do things. As employers we want that." And a comment from Interviewee-9 was about a general strength, "Students in your course know what they are getting into, and we hear it during the interviews. They ask better questions; questions that indicate they understand the job, and are able to judge how well they would like the job. That's big."

Aside from interview information gleaned from professionals, some secondary data was also obtained. The target university conducts group-exit-interviews among business students taking a capstone college course during their graduating semester. Students list pros/cons of the college curriculum. Typically students raise a few dozen ideas as positive highlights, and then students are asked to prioritize the highlights. Even though a small percent of business students take the sales program, in these exit interviews the sales program has been cited as being among the top 5 college highlights during each of the last three semesters. Prior to the curriculum design, it had not made a top-highlight list.

In addition, student evaluations of the course significantly improved after the change in curriculum. Every category of the evaluation improved after the change, including course difficulty, feeling like the student 'learned a lot', and an interest in the subject matter following the course. Maybe most telling was the fact that students opinions of sales, as a discipline, improved from 3.12 to 4.42 as a results of the change (Appendix 4).

CONCERNS AND ADAPTABILITY

Overall, this new sales emphasis has been viewed as a success at the target university. This new sales education philosophy, however, clearly has drawbacks. Appendix 5 summarizes key pros and cons. One concern of the newly designed program is cost. The activities in the redesigned program involve field trips and events that introduced new expenses.

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This concern has been mitigated by the fact that employers are now paying a fee to be partners in the program. These fees cover the cost of the course while providing employers with meaningful student interaction and the ability to find qualified new employees. Another concern is faculty time. Specifically, moving to behavioral exercises and involving high numbers of professionals requires added effort. Most of that time is the coordination and logistics of class. In the future, the target university is considering utilizing the revenue from the partnership fees to hire someone with administration capabilities to help lessen the faculty workload. A third concern is that the redesign sacrifices some new content, in favor of spending more time on behavioral reinforcement of other content. In order to assess the full impact of this, a follow-up study of graduates in the workforce may be conducted to better assess if this reduction in theoretical knowledge has had a negative impact on the students' success. Finally, a fourth concern is that students must take all three classes, so students cannot a single sales foundations class. At some universities, an initial sales course serves to increase student interest in taking further sales courses, so enrollment could be an issue. A university adopting this 9-credit format may wish to offer a separate 3-credit initial course for students who do not wish to take the full 9-credit course, and could provide some flexibility in the 9-credit course for student who take the initial course and subsequently decide to pursue the entire set of courses.

In terms of adaptability or duplicating this program, universities unconnected to area businesses may struggle to get high practitioner involvement. Also, some universities may have difficulty scheduling a 9-credit hour block for students, especially if their university has many student taking classes only part-time. Similarly, universities that need to teach such classes online would struggle to make this curriculum change work for them. Universities, however, that are rich with traditional students on a campus with proximal access to corporate partners may be encouraged by the preliminary success of such a program.

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Appendix 1: Results of Curriculum Direction Survey of Professionals

Each survey item is based on a pillar of Constructivist learning, and respondents were asked to what extent each was more or less important in a sales course as compared to other business courses. This was done in an effort to better understand the appropriateness of this new method, before restructuring the curriculum to fit the theory. The survey was given to sales professionals (n=24) at a local networking event of a regional marketing and sales organization, and the shaded items are statistically significant in that this item is deemed to be more important in sales than in other courses.

Survey Item*	Mean	Std. Deviation	t**	Sig.
Learning that there may be many ways to solve a problem or many ways to successfully deal with a situation.	3.50	.93	2.63	.02
Learning quantitative skills as part of the course; for example metrics or being able to calculate how material translates into company profit.	3.38	.88	2.10	.05
Learning by examining real-world situations; using more clear industry contexts as opposed to abstract studies or theoretical models.	3.58	1.11	2.81	.01
Spending more time on topics that students say interests them; so students have a bit more say in 'driving the selection' of material that is presented.	2.92	.88	-.46	.65
Having students be able to explain how they learned something or arrived at their solution.	2.88	.95	-.65	.52
General memorization of key principles; the 'fundamentals' that students are expected to know about an area of knowledge.	2.96	1.20	-.17	.87
Using an environment where students spend time with professionals and each other; so they learn in a way that 'socially reinforces' material.	3.67	.96	3.39	.00
Learning occurs through a variety of methods, for example a combination of reading, hands-on exercises, discussions, etc.	3.38	.88	2.10	.05

n=24

*Two tail t-test, where Ho: mean = 3

**Each of these items was provided as a Likert item, with 1 being 'much more important in non-sales area' and 5 being 'much more important in sales area'. 3 was a neutral item, suggesting they were of equal importance in both sales and non-sales areas.

Appendix 2: Three main challenges and two curriculum design modifications.

Challenge	Modification
Insufficient time. Class times of 60 or even 90 minutes are too rushed when professors engage students in experiential activities such as role plays or competitions.	In the redesigned program, the three sales classes were offered as co-requisites, and in back-to-back time sequence. Specifically, the Sales Foundations course is offered at one time, and then immediately afterwards the Sales Management course is offered, and then the Advanced Topics in Sales class is offered. They are all 1 hour classes that meet Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. With the co-requisite design, the class is essentially taught as one 9-credit class that meets for three hours on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Class session length is now longer and coordination problems have been eliminated.
Lack of coordination. Students take different sales classes at different times. For example, some students take the Sales Management course before taking the Advanced Topics course, and some students take Sales Management course after taking the Advanced Topics course. Thus, students in single class are varied in their knowledge, making it difficult to present material that effectively targets everyone. This sequencing challenge has been noted to cause problems in other areas too (Sun & Williams, 2004)	
Difficulty learning concepts and behaviors together. Some courses cover new concepts each week and allocate some class time each week for experiential exercises. In these environments, a challenge is students 'prioritize' concept memorization more than developing behavioral skills. This sentiment was conveyed along with a view that 'exams count for a lot' and thus students are motivated to focus their attention on memorizing or on constructing knowledge in ways that would enable them to score well on exams.	In the redesigned program, new concepts are taught during the first 40% of the semester, which concludes with a main examination. After that point during the semester, no other exams are given. Multiple graded assignments exist throughout the semester, but the student motivation to memorize goes down, and students are more engaged in learning through the experiential process.

Appendix 3: Interview Guide provided to Professionals.

Thirteen professionals provided input. Professionals had experience with the redesigned curriculum at the target university, all but two had experience with the program prior to its redesign, plus professionals had experience with sales programs at other universities.

- 1) Based on your involvement in the 'target university' sales program and other programs, where do you see the target program performs particularly well, and what are some main areas where this program could improve?
- 2) We're interested in comparisons you can make between the sales curriculum provided by the 'target university' and programs at other universities in four specific areas. Would you please evaluate the target university's program (relative to other programs) in each area, and provide examples of why you have this impression: Areas are: *(note to readers: these are the four Constructivist Learning areas)*
 - a. Training students to consider multiple perspectives.
 - b. Students learn in a way that involves realistic sales contexts
 - c. Students interact with each other and with professionals in ways that socially reinforce what they are learning about sales material.
 - d. Students practice/develop a variety of presentation and communication skills
- 3) Continuing with these four areas, please evaluate components of the sales course (left column). How well or poorly do these components help deliver sales training in ways that: a) encourage students to consider multiple perspectives, b) provide realistic contexts, c) socially reinforce material, and d) develop student presentation and communication skills.

Component	Infuses multiple perspectives	Provides realistic contexts	Socially reinforces material	Develops presentation and communication skills
Reading materials used in the course.				
The percent of time where professionals are in front of students in the course.				
The mix of course assignments and exercises.				
The end-of-semester sales competition.				

Appendix 4: Student Course Evaluation Averages

Question on Instructor Evaluation	Course	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig.*
I am learning a lot in this course	Old	251	3.62	.18	-44.90	321.09	.000
	New	185	4.56	.24			
This course has been difficult for me	Old	251	3.51	.39	-6.10	378.14	.000
	New	185	3.75	.42			
In relation to other courses, this workload was heavy	Old	251	3.53	.30	-24.51	358.46	.000
	New	185	4.31	.35			
As a result of taking this course, I have a more positive feeling toward this field of study	Old	251	3.12	.27	-50.52	409.78	.000
	New	185	4.42	.26			
For me, this is the most demanding course I have ever taken	Old	251	2.65	.35	-22.00	275.86	.000
	New	185	3.74	.61			
My knowledge about the content of the course has significantly improved as a result of taking this course	Old	251	3.58	.14	-55.93	296.24	.000
	New	185	4.56	.21			
The course was well organized	Old	251	3.66	.30	-18.77	320.80	.000
	New	185	4.32	.40			

*Not assuming equal variances of the two groups

Appendix 5: Pros and Cons of New Approach

Pros	Cons
Smaller total number of students for professor to manage, because the same cohort is in each part of the 9 credit class.	Time is needed to manage added administration tasks; scheduling professionals, rooms, buses for trips, etc. This can be professor and/or staff time.
Activities are possible to conduct that take longer amounts of time; role plays, field trips, a sales competition, etc.	Monetary costs exist for some activities that are part of the program. In our program, companies cover these costs.
Students grow in ways other than regular academic learning; interactions with professionals help them mature in other ways that align with the university mission.	Breakout and conference rooms are needed for various activities. Thus, facility limitations may exist that lessen the opportunity to run a program like this one.
Interest from companies is strong; companies that appreciate sales have viewed this program as a positive college highlight.	Professionals must be available and willing to coach students. Colleges located in isolated areas could have difficulties due to the lack of available professionals.
Student satisfaction is very high; students receive a unique 'immersion' experience in this program that they rate very positively, and this positive experience seems to have a halo effect in terms of how students view other aspects of their education.	If a college wishes to run a program like this one and have a stand-alone introductory sales class, then students taking the stand-alone class would be unable to take the 9 credit program, or would take the program and view some of the basic material as repetitive.
Students are more 'practically' prepared to evaluate sales positions, interview for them, negotiate compensation, and hit the ground running in their new sales role.	Coordinating content is more of a challenge with 9 (versus 3) credits, and when involving professionals.