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## Web-based-Research as Critical Pedagogy: A Reflection on its Application to Undergraduate Management Education.

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In disciplines such as Management, where research capacity is not seen as an obvious workplace skill, it is difficult to get students to engage in research activities. They see them as too difficult and without value. However, research activities in undergraduate Management education are vital as tools for developing key learning attributes such as critical thinking and skills in analysis and argument. Convinced of the high value of integrating research activities into undergraduate Management Education, I took on the challenge to find alternative ways for students to develop their research capacity and engage in actual research. Drawing on reflections on my experience of teaching undergraduate management subjects with research components, in this paper I discuss how Web-based research can promote critical thinking and raise consciousness among management students. This experience included designing strategies to introduce a form of electronic literacy into undergraduate education, to assist students to learn how to use the Web critically for research purposes, while enhancing learning based on conventional resources. In the methodology I propose for researching contemporary issues by collecting and analysing data from the Web I adapt the critical pedagogy of Freire for adult literacy into new forms of literacy involving critical use of the new media of communication.

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## **Web-based-Research as Critical Pedagogy: A Reflection on its Application to Undergraduate Management Education.**

### **Abstract**

In disciplines such as Management, where research capacity is not seen as an obvious workplace skill, it is difficult to get students to engage in research activities. They see them as too difficult and without value. However, research activities in undergraduate Management education are vital as tools for developing key learning attributes such as critical thinking and skills in analysis and argument. Convinced of the high value of integrating research activities into undergraduate Management Education, I took on the challenge to find alternative ways for students to develop their research capacity and engage in actual research. Drawing on reflections on my experience of teaching undergraduate management subjects with research components, in this paper I discuss how Web-based research can promote critical thinking and raise consciousness among management students. This experience included designing strategies to introduce a form of electronic literacy into undergraduate education, to assist students to learn how to use the Web critically for research purposes, while enhancing learning based on conventional resources. In the methodology I propose for researching contemporary issues by collecting and analysing data from the Web I adapt the critical pedagogy of Freire for adult literacy into new forms of literacy involving critical use of the new media of communication.

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## Introduction

In Anthropology, my home research discipline, the importance of linking research with learning has always seemed obvious. But with today's budget pressures and time restrictions, research-based learning is marginalised, especially at undergraduate level (Clark 1997). Doubts are raised about its relevance, on the assumption that research is only for higher degrees, for students who aim to become academics. This view is even more dominant when teaching business students. In the workplace, the destination of students with Management degrees, research is not recognised as having direct use. Confronted by this opposition, I had to reflect on how research activities could benefit these students.

During the last six years teaching in the University of Western Sydney's School of Management I have introduced students to the challenge of doing research. I designed and taught two undergraduate units: Global Strategy and Management (GS&M) and Business, Society and Policy (BSP). In both I included one major assignment requiring research and analysis of different sources, mostly web pages and online newspapers. The research had different aims in the two subjects: in GS&M to deal with strategies' businesses need to become players in the global market, and in BSP to understand the impacts of business on society. In both, the main focus was a company web page, complemented with other sources, online or from other media.

In this paper I systematise my reflections on my experience in the use of the internet for research as central for teaching in management courses. By making the steps explicit, this paper can be a resource, for my own future teaching and for other educators wishing to embrace this medium instead of fighting its inevitable use by students. I also drew on my experiences of researching web representations of organisations such as cooperatives or corporations (Coronado & Hodge 2001b, Coronado 2009a; Coronado & Fallon 2011)<sup>1</sup>. From that experience I developed strategies to use web-based research in education as a critical pedagogical tool for undergraduate courses. These integrate search guidelines and analytical tools to promote critical thinking and reflection.

The ideas of Paolo Freire on 'critical pedagogy' (1972) have played a seminal role in my theoretical thinking and practice, as discussed below. Similarly to Brookfield (2010), I understand that 'from a pragmatic and constructivist perspective, critical reflection is evident when people realise how they are active constructors of their own experience in a world of open possibilities' (p. 218). From this perspective critical thinking can be defined as having 'as its explicit focus [as being] uncovering, and challenging, the power dynamics that frame practice and uncovering and challenging hegemonic assumptions' (p. 216).

To show the value of web-based research as a tool for critical thinking, I will discuss the pedagogical basis of the approach to promote critical e-literacy, and the challenges of using the web for research. I will illustrate the approach by reflecting on my experience designing and teaching two subjects in a Management degree. Out of this process I have developed the pedagogical approach, including the conceptual basis of my teaching strategy to develop critical digital literacy that I will present next.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My reflections on this theme were also advanced by my involvement in two postgraduate seminars, on Discourse Analysis and *Enografía y Método* (Ethnography and Method). In these I workshopped strategies for ideological analysis of discourse (as periscopes to social reality) and firmed up the first version of my methodological approach, applied mainly to the internet but also to other kind of data, such as films (Coronado & Hodge 2004).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this conceptual frame has been implicit in my course design but not fully discussed with the students.

## Critical Pedagogy and Web-Based Research

In my teaching approach I drew extensively on the ideas of Paulo Freire (1972), whose radical pedagogy aimed to empower learners (in his case illiterate adult peasants). Even though teaching management students seems too far from the needs of poor peasants in Brazil, Freire's objectives are relevant, since use of the internet demands a new form of literacy, and raising social consciousness among students is crucial to responding to the social and ethical demands on business practices.

This pedagogical approach is not new. Many educators have followed the ideas of Freire and others who long ago introduced critical thinking into education<sup>3</sup>. However, in Management education, critical thinking still seems insufficiently promoted. It is not common to express different points of view from those in textbooks, and alternative ideas in many cases are rejected as 'anti-business'.

In my strategy for teaching and learning using web-based research I adopted three of Freire's ideas:

***Dialogical and problem-posing education:*** This involves a form of thinking 'which perceives reality as a process and transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action' (Freire 1972, p. 56). Students are 'critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher' (Freire 1972, p. 54) and are encouraged to reflect on different perspectives and their contradictions.

Problem-posing education is commonly used in Management courses. The difference is that problems in this case come from complex social issues, they involve different agendas (not just from business) and there is no one right or wrong solution. The learning process multiplies the possible outcomes and opens the capacity to see new possibilities.

***Untested feasibility:*** An active capacity to explore what lies beyond 'limit situations', which create a perception that present conditions are natural, unquestionable facts (Freire 1972, pp. 84-85). To discover untested feasibilities means to go beyond the known and taken-for-granted, to find creative options for solving problems in ways that have not been tested or imagined.

This is pertinent for management students because of the dominance of business-centric education, which has been incorporated into many courses and promulgated in the management-textbook industry. By using this principle students can move beyond ideologically imposed limitations to explore new values, thus opening the way to finding unseen possibilities.

***Generative themes and generative words:*** Generative themes are the 'major themes which together form the horizon of [students'] practical thought and action' (Freire 1972, p. 86). For management courses, generative themes represent key issues in contemporary society that affect business practices, such as climate change, or corporate malpractice, such as the oil-leak disaster in the Gulf of Mexico (SMH 2010). Generative themes in this case may relate to the responsibility of businesses in society. They can be selected for research as a result of critical reflections on issues discussed in class, and explored through specific research questions.

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<sup>3</sup> For a review of critical thinking in education see, for example, Brookfield (1987) and Phiters & Soden (2000).

Generative words are derived from discussion of the generative themes and connect with reflections on 'perception[s] of the dialectical relations which exist between the themes and their opposites' (Friere 1972, p. 86). In this case generative words emerge from reflections on the literature on specific generative themes, as linked with students' everyday life experience. In BSP this reflection is reinforced by the use of the sociological imagination (Mills 1979), through which students function as social analysts (see Coronado 2009c, also Duarte 2009)<sup>4</sup>.

Based on these pedagogical principles, I designed assignments so that students respond to research questions, or problems posed as questions. The principles were not explicitly named but were implicit in the proposed approach in the subject, and provided the underlying basis for the class activities. In class we evaluated different, usually conflicting positions. I invited them to make their point of view explicit, but not to assume that it was the 'natural way'. We also identified internal contradictions in order to uncover implicit ideologies. I repeatedly emphasised the rules of classroom discourse, that all views were welcome, so long as we offered arguments to sustain them. I discouraged the use of the words 'right' and 'wrong'.

In this learning environment students had to question everything, with *what* questions followed by inquiries into the *how* and the *why*, and *whose* interests benefit from particular decisions or actions. My aim was to develop students' capacity to reflect on their own assumptions, values and practices, as a first step to positioning themselves as active, conscious agents of their own learning, in dialogue with teacher and classmates. From there, they would move beyond imposed or self-imposed limits to discover new possibilities that were not obvious before. In this process, students were encouraged to participate in dialogues, and question processes of power and ideology implicit in the discourses and practices they were studying. In this way they developed a more independent capacity to think and act.

In applying these principles to digital literacy it is important to discuss some of the opportunities and limitations the internet brings to research, and outline strategies to overcome the difficulties<sup>5</sup>. The next section introduces some of the methodological assumptions that are relevant to understanding the importance of research beyond specific assignments. This is especially pertinent because web-based research is used not just to test students' knowledge but to connect their values with today's issues.

## The Challenges of Web-Based Research

The more or less free access to internet resources in developed countries carries great potential but also poses some challenges. To use web-based research as an educational tool demands that explicit processes be developed to deal with the difficulties of the medium.

Electronic texts in different media (written text, speech, sounds and still and moving images) circulate the internet, transmitting messages that their producers construct for specific purposes. Through monologic or interactive messages, organisations communicate to their potential audiences who they are, what service or product they offer and how they operate and relate with others.

As a network, the internet links representations contained in multiple nodes. Any node includes meanings shaped by the culture and society from which it emerges (Coronado & Hodge 2001a). As such, the internet can be characterised as a hypertext, a network of networks (Snyder 1996), in

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<sup>4</sup> The sociological imagination is explicitly studied as the main approach for all class activities.

<sup>5</sup> A version of the methodology for web-based research is included in Coronado and Fallon (2011).

which electronic texts carrying representations are interlinked, bringing together multiple producers of messages, received and interpreted by numerous interlocutors (Coronado & Hodge 2001b).

These texts come from producers who interact with other people and meanings inside and outside cyberspace. They are social actors, members of their society and of specific organisations. In that sense, cyberspace is as broad and complex as the reality of the society that produces it, including multiple interests, ideologies, values. Online texts emanate from organisations (businesses in our case) and convey meanings about them, their relationships and their environment. Hence, even if they are only fragments of a much larger whole, they can be used to inquire about those organisations and their social context.

Like any other text, digital representations are influenced by explicit and implicit objectives, by relations of power and by the ideologies of the groups concerned. Multiple agendas are expressed as part of the organisation's hypertext. These fragmented self-representations can be seen as distorted pictures. But, paradoxically, this quality makes the texts useful by giving researchers access to fragments of organisational reality and values, pointing to underlying contradictions.

Another important characteristic of the internet is what is regarded as its inherently 'democratic' nature. Forms of control exist to a certain degree, but as an open network it allows anyone to participate who wants to, if they have access. This generates infinite meanings, but requires robust strategies to avoid information overload.

Using this openness as an advantage, students can be guided to create sets of texts with relevant meanings. These hypertexts need to be discrete, containing rich and diverse messages from different sources, not all controlled by one organisation. By-passing the hegemonic academic and business gatekeepers, web searches can find many different perspectives, from carefully packaged messages to spontaneous positions representing dissent or support, consensus or conflict. Contrasting representations meet in the hypertext, allowing researchers to compare different perspectives, shaped by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies, and drawing on prior information to make their critical evaluations.

The number of texts for investigation depends on the scope and time frame of the research. A single closed hypertext (even a company web page) can provide a rich and diverse set of data for analysis. Web texts are connected with hyperlinks, actually or potentially, and their production is shaped by common environments, which makes it possible to find common generative themes between organisations or individuals. Meanings connected to generative themes – the 'horizon of [students'] practical thought and action', involved in the issues under research (see Freire above) – allow relevant texts (nodes) to be selected as part of the closed hypertext.

In a first pass, a discrete hypertext might be constituted by identifying a generative theme from which to define generative words, which can be used as key words for searches. Any internet search brings more texts than are desirable, and informed selections need to be made. Texts have to be filtered using criteria derived from the generative themes. In studying organisations, the web page of a selected case (e.g., Company: Rio Tinto + generative theme: environmental degradation) might be taken as a central node, using its web of meanings to define links to be followed to other direct or indirect stakeholders, inside or outside the web page.

The construction of the discrete hypertexts in itself can be used in the process of developing critical thinking. It involves understanding theoretical frameworks to generate the generative themes, connecting reflexively with life experiences in order to identify generative words, and using critical judgement to select relevant and reliable sources. The definition of 'reliability' in sources is problematic. Because this research aims to evaluate different perspectives, some sources



that would be regarded as unreliable from a business perspective (such as anti-business web pages) provide relevant points of view from which to question some more 'legitimate' sources, such as respectable newspapers. The interpretation of meanings should always acknowledge the conditions of texts' production (see Hodge & Kress 1993).

The next step is the analysis of the discrete hypertext, first as a whole (how different players intersect) and then by further selection of key texts for in-depth analysis. In the first approximation it is important to identify who the actors are, how they are related (through conflict or collaboration) and what are the organisations' relevant events, explicit aims and stated values. In the case of student research, the actors mostly come from the different sections of the company under study, plus internal and external stakeholders identified by the generative theme selected for research. All relationships between actors involve negotiations, conflicts and collaborations that students should identify.

This research is complemented by following up relevant generative words around the selected themes. The aim is to identify other textual representations that refer to the main ideas found in the literature on the generative theme, coming from different stakeholders. Students are encouraged to create matrices to classify the texts' content by theme and perspective, to produce an overview of the case, and to visualise similarities and differences. This activity in itself supports the development of analytical skills.

Since digital texts can be found in different media (e.g., images and written and verbal texts), it is important to have analytical strategies that respond to that diversity (see Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001). Analysis needs to include a form of 'critical reading', which pays attention to overt and covert meanings in order to discover what is behind them. This form of analysis can be called 'reading as analysis' (Carbó 2001). This involves repeated 'readings' of the same text/image, with the sceptical 'reader' questioning it in order to identify implicit and deliberately hidden meanings and signs of ideological assumptions (Hodge & Coronado 2006). This 'soft' form of critical discourse analysis is accessible to all reflective readers, including students.

These theoretical principles have been implicit in my design of teaching activities and research assignments, slowly becoming more and more explicit by introducing new instructions. In the next section I reflect on my teaching story, exploring how research activities were introduced for different learning aims.

## **Introducing Web-Based Research in Management Education**

With my previous background it was almost impossible to conceive of teaching without including a critical perspective, emphasising societal aspects to be debated amongst students, with some form of research as basic to learning. I was confronted with the difficulty of teaching students about organisations neither they nor I knew, in conditions where my experiences did not encompass the complexity of the business world they had to understand and work in. The solution was to make students teach me through their research. However, it was a challenge to manage the large numbers of students in each class to research organisations<sup>6</sup>.

In this context the first challenge was to design research activities to help students understand business organisations (their subject of study), knowing the restrictions they would encounter in accessing them. The obvious solution was to use primary resources available on the internet,

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<sup>6</sup> The subjects I have taught have on average 200 students, distributed across different campuses.

which is used by businesses for many purposes (both within the organisation and to create public visibility).

Using my own research to develop strategies to study organisations online, I began a process of trialling and continually revising assignments to develop better forms of using the internet for research as a critical pedagogy tool, and prepare students to become web researchers.

#### *Preparation for critical digital literacy*

Even though many claim that the current generation of students are ‘young digital natives [and] expert navigators’ of the Web (CAL 2008, p. 8), when it comes to academic work they seem as digitally challenged as the rest of us non-digital natives. The new digital literacy involves skills different from those previously used in book-based education. Today, students combine conventional modes of reading and accessing information with use of electronic resources, which provide alternative forms of knowledge and new literacy skills. As stated by Alvarez (1998, p. 42):

When accessing information on the World Wide Web, the conventional reading models change from linear and sequential to an electronic text that takes the reader/viewer from one place to another through a series of choices. Students need to critically analyse and make cogent decisions when reading this electronic text, interpreting graphics, watching videos, and making connections with audio recordings. They must also be discerning when processing electronic information to determine accuracy and worth.

Many students develop some of these skills in their everyday life, but it cannot be assumed that all have done so. Nor have they necessarily learned how to transfer that literacy to their university studies. Strategies for developing online critical literacy have to be taught, and that was what students demanded. Responding to the need for more guidance and practical illustrations, to reinforce the skills needed for web-based research, I began making some strategies more explicit. My aim was to prepare students better for the assignments (their main concern) while enhancing their learning and their formation as critical citizens (my concern).

From the outset I found that students undertaking web-based research were not aware that internet resources are not just secondary information, but need to be analysed as primary data. For that reason, I began to emphasise the need to evaluate, reflect on and analyse the collected texts and images as data, and as a basic rule, never just to accept statements by companies or other stakeholders as certain truths. I also introduced different tutorial activities and preparatory assignments. Among these I included analysis of videos, group presentations of partial research outcomes, application of concepts to web data, scenario-building, reflective literature reviews and online discussions reflecting on their own experiences and perspectives.

Similarly, I asked them to synthesise ‘in their own words’ their reflections on the weekly readings, and to engage in group discussions to analyse cases, news items and web pages from different perspectives. All class activities aimed to increase the skills of analysis and synthesis, so they could discover their own voice and ideological position concerning controversial issues. All these means were important to frame their use of web-based research as the central learning tool.

Selection of data from the internet was guided by research questions, linked to the content of the subject, concepts from readings (Coronado 2009b) and learning notes. The analysis always required them to compare different perspectives on the company's actions (pro and con, from businesses and stakeholders). They were also required to include well-justified recommendations to the company for alternative actions to solve conflicts between different stakeholders and the company.

To illustrate the approach, in the next section I will present how I have used web-based-research as critical pedagogy in the subject Business, Society and Policy. I will include some guidelines used during tutorials to prepare students for the research assignment. From a critical pedagogy perspective this process is as important as the assessable outcome.

*Guidelines for teaching web-based research*

Before students commence the research assignment, they have already studied the main approaches and concepts covered in the subject. These include historical and contemporary forces that shape relationships between business, society and government, emphasising the conditions of capitalism and the ideologies that affect relations between the players (see Appendix 1). Students are encouraged to use sociological imagination (Mills 1979) and ethical reasoning (Donaldson & Werhane 2005) to reflect on dilemmas for different stakeholder interests.

Preparatory work is designed for students to develop the academic skills needed for the research. The first two assignments include an online discussion and a group case analysis. Discussion based on the readings focuses on one controversial question on which students briefly write their views, evaluating arguments of others, and providing their own perspective in response. This assignment involves critical reflection, analysis and synthesis. The second assignment is an analysis of one conflictual case involving different stakeholders and ethical dilemmas, with each group given a different case. For this assignment each student in a group of three is allocated one stakeholder perspective (business, social groups or government). To analyse the case each perspective must be identified, explained and interpreted<sup>7</sup>. Then students negotiate with the other members of the group for better solutions to the problem, to discover through dialogue the 'untested feasibilities' proposed by Freire.

After this foundation the research assignment becomes the main focus of all activities in class, online and in their own time (Appendices 2 and 3 include the assignment rationale and instructions to students). Students select one research question from six possibilities. Topics include issues such as sweatshops, child labour, discrimination (race, gender, age, weight, disability or sexual preference), breaches of consumer rights, environmental harm and ethical trade, all of which are significant issues for contemporary capitalism. All research questions touch on controversies in discourses and practices arising from interactions between different sectors, business, government and society.

After selecting a topic, each student reflects on concepts in the readings, especially as related to the chosen research question. The subject content guides students to identify generative themes, which in turn provide the generative words used for internet searching, as they draw on their own reflections and additional readings. The topic itself provides the first keyword, while the readings suggest other ideas to form a set of generative words. Table 1 gives some examples.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Fairclough (2000), these three steps constitute critical discourse analysis.

<b>Table 1: Examples of generative words from generative themes</b>						
Theme Words	Discrimination	Sweatshops	Child labour	Environment harm	Consumer rights	Ethical trade
1	equal opportunity	outsourcing	slavery	waste reduction	health harm	fair trade
2	glass ceiling	intensive labour	illegal	influenza	liability	niche markets
3	unfair dismissal	human rights	health hazards	sustainable	deceptive advertisements	poverty
4	unethical	unethical	unethical	degradation	reputation	organic
5	harassment	exploitation	Job opportunity	pollution	litigation	dysfunctional trade

Using these as keywords, students can approach the literature, whether from library catalogues (including e-resources) or scholarly web services linked to peer-reviewed journals. After the literature review, they have a set of texts (a literature hypertext) to discuss in a section of the assignment.

After reflecting on the literature review, students refine the generative words and select the case study. To locate a suitable case, they might search web pages of key government bodies, watchdog organisations or international institutions involved in some way in controlling or critiquing problematic impacts of business. If the literature already points to promising cases, students might use company names as key words, and then evaluate the potential of the case to provide substantial data. Otherwise, another search using generative words can be performed.

When a suitable business case is identified, a primary set of texts (a hypertext) is built by selecting thematically relevant parts of the organisation web page, including self-representations shaped by interests and ideologies (e.g., corporate social responsibility links, foundations, mission and vision statements, codes of conduct, press releases, financial reports). The primary set of texts should also include watchdog organisations.

Students need to expand the primary hypertext to include other views, using advanced searches combining the name of the company with generative words already selected (e.g., sweatshops). By this means they can access web pages and news items produced by different stakeholders who might have views different from the company's. They should identify stakeholders involved, the kind of involvement and various views about the company's actions (for or against), and examine the different agendas and contrasting views included in the set of texts. Analysis of data from the collected texts begins with the selection of at least one document from each stakeholder that includes at least one of the main generative words. The next step is to reflect on differences, and look for the ideologies behind statements in the texts.

To illustrate the kind of critical analysis expected for this assignment, sample texts are provided for analysis and discussion in tutorials. Sample texts are analysed in class through a critical-reading strategy, which includes analysis of explicit meanings, implied values and anomalies identified in the text (e.g., contradictions or statements that sound awkward or unexpected from that kind of speaker). Below I include a tutorial activity I used in BSP to show students the steps in analysing data from web pages.

### Example of Reading as Analysis

1. Read the next statement and analyse and discuss what is said in the text.

**From Paul Pressler**  
President and Chief  
Executive Officer, Gap Inc.

We've taken important steps toward safer conditions and better treatment for workers in garment factories, but the social responsibility issues across the industry remain immensely complex.

In the days after we released our first social responsibility report last year, it wasn't easy to see headlines like, "Gap admits factory abuses."

But this was more than offset by positive responses from the media, employees and other stakeholders who told us how much they appreciated our candor – and how they wanted to work with us to address the challenges described in the report.

Their response renewed our commitment to improving garment factory conditions, and reinforced our belief that talking about challenges is an important step toward resolving them.

Of course, we know that driving change of this magnitude isn't easy. We've taken important steps toward safer conditions and better treatment for workers in garment factories, but the social responsibility issues across the industry remain immensely complex.

I'm optimistic, however, that progress in our industry over the next decade will be more profound than anything we've seen, including improved labor standards, factory conditions and business practices – because ethical sourcing represents a better way of doing business in a global economy.

That doesn't mean we expect our efforts to create a competitive advantage. While ethical sourcing is an essential part of the long-term growth and sustainability of our business, our goal is to help improve conditions across the apparel industry as a whole. And we know that's not something we can do alone.

Over the past year, we've learned the power of collective engagement, and of open, honest discussion about the issues that we and many other companies face. As such, we have been expanding our participation in collaborative efforts.

2. Read it again and identify what is implied.

For analysis of texts follow the next steps:

❖ **First Reading: explicit message**

1. What does the text tell you about the issue under investigation?
2. Who is the speaker and who is the audience?
3. What is the aim of the message?
4. What does the speaker want the audience to believe?

❖ **Notes from first reading**

❖ **Second reading: going deeper**

• **Be suspicious, read between lines.**

1. What do you find that was not obvious in the first reading?
2. What is not said but implied?
3. What is the link with majority views about the issue? Does it reinforce them or question them?
4. What is taken for granted?
5. Identify statements that contradict what has been stated in other parts of the text.

❖ **Notes on second reading**

❖ **Write down your analysis**

These class activities prepare students to reflect on the understanding they have gained, and be able to discuss in their own words how they now see the issue after reflective and critical reading. This again reinforces Freire's principles of critical pedagogy, dialogical and problem-posing education and untested feasibilities. Finally, to expand their capacity for research and critical thinking, students are required to conclude with recommendations on how the company might better fulfil their social responsibility with respect to the issue. The writing of the research assignment demands a capacity for synthesis, as students need to summarise findings from a complex research process in a short, clearly defined structure (see Appendix 2).

The preparation and assignments, seen as an integrated process, provides students with life-long critical skills. As one student said to me, 'This class should be recommended for all business students. It changed the way I see the world'. The speaker of these words was an accountancy student, who took the subject as an elective in 2008. Although anecdotal, it typifies sentiments I have heard over these years, which motivate me to continue improving this approach.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the reasons for students' initial resistance to research in undergraduate management courses, I realised that in business education research must be seen not as an aim in itself but as a means for developing attributes for life-long learning, relevant for students' future as managers, and as conscious, effective citizens. The focus needed to be on process more than on outcomes. Thus, tutorial activities and all other assignments had to be strongly aligned with a critical pedagogy, to show students how to do research, carry out analysis and synthesis and construct informed arguments.

Introducing research into the main assignment when teaching undergraduate management students has always been satisfying to me. I have been agreeably surprised by how the majority of students have creatively taken up the challenge. The principles and steps I have designed to prepare students for the research assignment can certainly be refined and improved by continuous reflection on the practice and evaluation of the course. Students' comments in formal and informal evaluations of the subject have convinced me of the value of web-based research as critical pedagogy and for raising consciousness. There is, however, a need for a more systematic application of explicit guidelines to lead students into the use of critical digital literacy in life-long learning. In this respect the proposal is still a work in progress.

Even though the proposal is still open to further development, I hope that the argument itself, combining pedagogical principles, reflections on teaching practice and illustrative materials, is a convincing demonstration of the educational value of research using internet resources as data, and as a way to understand organisations and their social contexts. By researching business organisations' web pages, and developing skills in critical web analysis, students can connect abstract theories to concrete realities that touch on their everyday work experiences and their values – and go beyond, empowering them to find and contribute alternative understandings.

As a whole the paper offers a guide for my future students to do web-based research assignments, and a tool for other lecturers to adapt for teaching in their own areas of expertise. Others may hopefully see the value of the approach, as a means to helping undergraduates in business and related fields transform themselves into critical citizens.

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## **Appendix 1: Business, Society and Policy weekly content**

### ***Module I: Content, Approach and Context***

- Week 1: Social Imagination & Ethical Reasoning
- Week 2: Introduction to Ethical Reasoning
- Week: 3B-S-G Context: Development of Capitalism
- Week 4: Online Discussion

### ***Module II: Theoretical Perspectives and Core Concepts for Understanding BSG Dynamics***

- Week 5: Ideologies and Policies: The Role of the State in the Management of the Economy
- Week 6: Ethics & Social Responsibility of Business
- Week 7: The Management of Stakeholder Interests in the Local and Global Context.

### ***Module III: Researching & Analysing Issues in the Relationship Between B, S & G in Contemporary Society*** (Weeks 8-14)

- Impacts of Business on Primary Stakeholders in the Workplace:
  - A: Sweatshops
  - B: Child labour
  - C: Discrimination
- Impacts from Business on the Wellbeing of Society in General and Specific Stakeholders:
  - A: Breach of consumer rights
  - B: Environmental damage
  - C: Ethical trade Organisations (e.g., sustainable business, fair trade)

## **Appendix 2: 2008 BSP Research Assignment Rationale**

The aim of the research assignment is to develop the skills required to investigate different sources of information about one specific issue, and to critically select and analyse primary and secondary data to support a student's arguments in response to a research question.

- The Research Assignment uses primary (data collected by the student from web pages and newspapers) and secondary (interpretations from others on the case or the issue) research data to answer one of the assigned research questions.
- In the course of their investigation, students will source and use one specific case example (i.e. one company) to illustrate the interaction between the B, S and G sectors, in relation to the issue selected.
- The Research Assignment (of approx. 2000 words) should include the following:
  - Abstract (100 words)

- Presentation of views on the issue, taken from a review of literature (700 words)
- Presentation of a case example (a selected company), to illustrate the actions taken by business in relation to the issue under investigation (250 words)
- Discussion of the case, comprising a critical view, from the student's own perspective on the evaluation of the B, S & G views and actions (700 words)
- Conclusion, comprising a synthesis of the main issues and a proposal for better managing the issues (250 words)
- List of references (8-12 references including web pages from relevant stakeholders)

### **Appendix 3: Instructions for BSP Research Assignment**

Drawing on the concepts and theories studied in Modules II and III, write a Research Assignment addressing the impacts of business activities on stakeholders and the actions taken by business, governments and social groups.

Base your Assignment on your research into any ONE of the following Research Questions. Use one case (a business or corporation) to illustrate the positive and negative outcomes you identify.

1. Why do companies use sweatshops, and what are the impacts of that for business and for society?
2. Why is child labour used by some corporations, and how does this impact on the conditions of children's lives and the society they live in?
3. Why is discrimination (e.g., due to race, ethnicity, gender, disability or age) considered a problem for society, and what role should business play to avoid its impacts?
4. Why should consumers be protected from business activities (e.g., products and advertisements) and what are the risks of ignoring consumer rights?
5. Why the environment is considered a business stakeholder, and what are the consequences for business and for society of ignoring it?
6. Why are some businesses moving into 'alternative ethical practices' (e.g., fair trade), and what are the impacts on society and on business?

**The Research Process** involves these steps:

1. Identify the problem (this will assist in your selection of the appropriate Research Question – see above).
2. From the research question you select, identify some key words that might be relevant for your web searches (, discrimination, gender, 'equal opportunity', 'glass ceiling', ethical trade, and consumerism). The readings in the Book of Readings can be used to help you come up with some key words.
3. Use these key words to search in 'advanced search' mode the Library catalogue and E-Resources (e.g., ABI/Inform Global; Business Source Premier; Proquest ANZ Newsstand; Factiva). You could even use Google Scholar.
4. To select literature for your Literature Review, read the abstracts of journal articles, etc., from the Web (or note their details in the Library catalogue), and select one or two recent relevant books and articles that analyse the research problem from the approach you are taking. (For example, if you are researching discrimination in the workplace, you might focus on literature that

refers to workplace issues from a sociological or ethical perspective). It can be acceptable to take a broad approach to your literature searches, but remember that you may save time by being more focused on a well-defined topic or research question.

5. From the literature, identify the different views taken by the various authors in the academic debate.

6. To limit the findings of your searches, and as a matter of quality control, you should focus only on peer-reviewed journals that were published recently (for example, in the last 10 years). Use combinations of words using Boolean searches (e.g., "sweatshop AND outsourcing"; "child labour -sex").

7. Use newspaper web pages accessed from the E-resources of the Library (e.g., The Sydney Morning Herald or an international news agency such as Reuters, Proquest ANZ Newsstand or Factiva). These can help you to identify cases that have reached the news, as such news articles might provide a useful source of comparison with the data that you can easily obtain from a corporation's website.

8. Based on the information collected, identify a case (a business or corporation) whose activities are associated with the problem in positive and/or negative ways (for example, because the corporation has implemented CSR programs, or because it has been the target of protest from global social movements).

9. Identify NGOs or other organisations that work for a 'solution' to the problem under investigation. (For example, the ILO for labour standards, Human Rights to prevent child-labour exploitation, consumer watch organisations)

10. Collect data about the case, focusing on the problem under investigation (drawing on data from the corporation's web pages, from NGOs or from critics of the corporation's practices).

11. Be careful to check which countries are involved, since the business environment might be relevant in evaluating the implications of the company's actions