

Sustainable Business Practices for Sustainable Futures: Partnering in Higher Education

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Abstract

The Professional Communication Unit (PCU) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has developed innovative, multimodal teaching approaches that aim to contribute to the notion of corporate citizenship. Two separate course partnerships strive to equip senior commerce students with graduate attributes valued in business and government. Course one involves a partnership with environmental consultants who collaborate with staff to mentor students during their institutional investigation of sustainable business practices. Course two involves collaboration between students, staff and small business owner-managers. It focuses on sustainability practices of the chosen SME in relation to the triple bottom line. The model aims to prepare students for societal challenges in the workplace and to offer technical support to these SMEs to increase their competitiveness. In the wake of global financial and environmental crises, this article amplifies the need for collaborative partnering as all constituents aim to remain relevant and sustainable in the 21st century.

Keywords: professional communication, sustainability, scenario learning and pedagogy

1. Introduction

The Professional Communication Unit (PCU), housed in the School of Management Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) offers a number of core courses to senior and postgraduate Commerce students. Staff members of the school have long felt the need to devise innovative and

collaborative teaching approaches that play a transformation role in society and contribute to developing a “thoughtful citizenry” [1].

Sustainable business practices have become an educational imperative given global conditions yet few local and international tertiary institutions pay more than cursory attention to sustainability as a focal tenet of commerce curricula [2; 3; 4; 5]. Universities are often viewed as ivory towers of intellectual pursuit far removed from the plight of ordinary citizens and the environment, operating in silos with little collaborative partnering across departments and faculties. Besides internal collaboration, few seek out external stakeholders from the public and private sector as partners in the educational process thereby narrowing the gap between business and academia. As signatories of the Talloires Declaration on sustainable practice as well as the UN Gulf Charter, the university

is uniquely positioned to develop curricula, research initiatives, operational systems, and outreach activities in the public and private sector to support sustainable futures [9; 10; 11].

This article will outline a pedagogical approach which aims to contribute to this two-pronged mission of sustainability and collaborative partnering. This pedagogical approach will be demonstrated on two separate collaborative courses. The first is a PCU course, the Scenario Learning and Pedagogy course (SLP) and the second is a collaborative effort between two separate and credit-bearing courses: the Business Communication and Career Development course run by the PCU and another diploma course called Business in Context. This has come to be known as the PCU/BIC collaborative project. Sending graduates into the workplace who are technically able, communicatively skilled, environmentally literate, entrepreneurially savvy and interculturally sensitive is what a tertiary education, particularly in commerce, should be aiming to accomplish.

These two course partnerships are also quite different in terms of course content, duration, class size and stakeholder engagement which exemplifies the flexibility of this pedagogical approach. Both have been running for five and four years respectively which has served to strengthen their respective applications and iron out initial teething problems.

A brief overview of the theoretical framework and methods used to capture and analyse the data is followed by a separate description of each course in terms of its practical application. The challenges and benefits for all internal and external stakeholders will be outlined jointly before a few key conclusions and avenues for further research are posited.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodological Stance

In both instances, the methods used draw on a mixed mode approach which attempts to replicate the multimodal and multicultural course dimensions.

At a theoretical level, SLP draws on a multidisciplinary framework which intersects across a range of disciplines such as professional communication, applied linguistics and education, specifically theories of multimodal social semiotics and the multiliteracies pedagogical framework [3; 12; 13; 14]. As communication in the 21st century is characterised by verbal and visual hybridity, a multimodal and multiliteracies approach seems apt whereby students in and out of class explore and collaboratively negotiate various discourses, media, genres, modes and sites of display, both traditional and digital [3]. The PCU/BIC course privileges an array of inter-related disciplines and focus areas relating to business literacy and the triple bottom line: social, financial and environmental sustainability [15; 5; 16].

Although both courses advocate a socio-cultural constructivism where students are actively involved in their own learning and meaning making and contribute towards teaching and assessment, the PCU/BIC course, in particular, involves active negotiation not only with a number of expert facilitators but also a real business client, in this case, a small-to-medium enterprise (SME) [17; 18; 5; 3]. As emerging young entrepreneurs, these teams learn experientially through collaborative partnering and trial and error, what works and should be kept and what obstructs and needs to be discarded.

According to Nodoba et al. [5] the following themes that run throughout the PCU/BIC collaboration require mentioning as partners endeavour to:

- develop creative problem solving techniques;
- develop business driven and experiential action-learning techniques;
- learn how to build effective teams;
- explore an ensemble of professional communication practices, and
- develop an understanding of what it means to be a transformational leader in South Africa.

This integration of theories, methodologies and themes across a range of focus areas reinforces both students' processes and products from draft through to final client deliverables. The theoretical underpinning of these approaches is reinforced by classroom observation, tape and video recorded transcripts of key moments of classroom practice, student assessments, reflective blogs and letters and informal interviews with selected stakeholders.

3. Overview of Collaborative Courses

3.1 Scenario Learning and Pedagogy (SLP)

SLP, a term coined by Terri Grant to describe a situated practice model of teaching and learning, involves a carefully selected scenario in which an entire professional communication course is embedded. The first forays into SLP occurred in the 90's when computer science scenarios were used in which to embed a professional writing course for senior computer science students [19]. The commerce faculty application was introduced in 2008 with a group comprising senior undergraduate and some postgraduate Honours students [3]. The scenario selected involves sustainable business practices with a particular emphasis on environmental sustainability at the university. The big question students are commissioned to investigate is: does the university practise what it preaches in terms of sustainable development?

At the start of the course, students choose their investigative topics from an array of environmental issues such as energy, transport, water, waste management and the built environment. Lists of internal and external consultants are recruited to act as guest lecturers, advisors, mentors and, finally, examiners to the process which runs over an entire semester. Students, working in pairs, take the initiative to gather information and as the range of scenarios involve real-life practices and policies, a primary rather than secondary research focus is privileged with students needing to engage experts via the internet, telephone or face-to-face. Although these survey and project management processes are not graded and are part of the 'hidden curriculum' as such, they serve to introduce student teams to the rigours of survey methodologies including setting up appointments, sticking to deadlines, working with busy peoples' schedules and collaborating with a number of parties timeously and over time.

Students undergo drafting exercises to help them plan and design their products for display. These comprise a Mindmap whereby students visually display their proposed plan of action and content of interest. This is followed by a more verbal and linear articulation of format and content in the form of a numbered Topic Outline. Both these informal visual and verbal products are presented in class as posters and on screen respectively where they are debated, contested and negotiated in class until parties are satisfied with content, focus and presentation. Over

and above draft written products, students also rehearse and then present their videoed Oral Report and all these products and processes of teaching and learning are interspersed with just-in-time instruction, embodied reflection and iterative cycles of transformed practice until the final products are delivered to the client at the end of the course (14; 12; 13; 3]. In the most recent iteration of the course, student videos were posted to the university website, Facebook and YouTube. The final written Investigation Report is also accompanied by a Cover Letter and an Executive Summary to engage the reader and provide a snapshot of key information.

3.2 The PCU/BIC collaborative project

In the PCU/BIC collaboration, postgraduate diploma students are required to deliver various professional products based on a live research project. The class is divided into teams of about six students. Each team is commissioned to identify an SME that employs a minimum of 10, maximum of 50 people and to investigate its sustainable business practices. Teams are required to conduct an in-depth analysis of the extent to which the small business demonstrates a commitment to sustainability and the 'triple bottom line', namely, People (social responsibility), Planet (environmental responsibility) and Profit (financial accountability). The emphasis of the live research project is to enable students to develop into effective entrepreneurial teams.

In addition, students get to experience first-hand challenging contextual conditions and responsibilities of conducting business in South Africa. Besides environmental considerations and Corporate Social Investment (CSI), issues unique to South Africa such as Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) are targeted. Through this live research project both staff and students are afforded opportunities of exploring entrepreneurial mindsets and practices in innovative and ethical ways while simultaneously tackling sustainability and raising environmental consciousness on and off campus. The research project has a number of deliverables that serve as interventions to assist student teams with the process of compiling their sustainability reports on their chosen SMEs.

After identifying a business, teams are required to write a Letter of Introduction in order to engage the company and solicit their consent for the investigation. At the same time teams are required to draw up a Group Contract which serves as a code of conduct during the investigation. This is followed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to which both the student team and company become signatories, legally binding both parties to agreed-upon terms. Draft products such as a description of their Research Methodology and Plan and an extended Topic Outline of their report follow. This allows facilitators to gauge their progress and introduce instructional interventions along their developmental trajectory. These interventions have been shown to impact positively on the quality of reports produced by allowing facilitators to act as consultants providing timeous and constructive feedback and support throughout to these novice researchers and emerging communities of practice [17; 18].

These deliverables also assist teams to work methodically through the triple bottom line. For the people component teams have to reflect on working conditions, staff incentives, BBBEE and CSI of their chosen business. For planet the focus shifts to the business's environmental policy and practices regarding waste, energy and pollution. In terms of profit, teams are required to demonstrate the financial well-being of the company in terms of profitability and long-term sustainability. They are also required to establish the relationships between these three components and their reciprocal impacts.

The final Sustainability Report sets out and evaluates the teams’ findings in order to draw both short and long term recommendations for the small business (client) in all areas of the triple bottom line and is accompanied by an Executive Summary and Covering Letter.

In the second semester of the PCU course, a Mini Conference is held where teams present their reports to an audience made up of both internal and external constituents. Student peers and staff members are accompanied by invited guests such as sponsors, prize-givers and most importantly the small business owner-manager for whom the final payoff is being allowed to network, ask questions and provide feedback to teams, and, in turn, receive an edited version of the final report. For teams, the satisfaction of getting good client feedback is enhanced by two major sponsored financial incentives; in 2011 A ‘Best Report’ prize was followed in 2012 and 2013 with an additional ‘Best Speaker’ award.

Underlying the sustainability themes is the Map for Crystal Clear Communication which forms the cornerstone of the PCU component. MAP stands for Message-Audience-Purpose and FOR relates to Form/Format-Organise-Remove which incorporates editing of the message for both audience and purpose. This in turn ensures the CCC: Credibility-Consistency-Completeness of the message for purpose and audience. These underlying principles of effective professional communication form the foundation of and rationale for this negotiated pedagogy.

3.3 Course comparison: characteristics and deliverables

As mentioned, these two collaborative courses are similar in relation to pedagogical approach and subject matter but also differ in a number of crucial ways which speak to the flexibility and adaptability of these applications. In the tables below, these differences as well as the varied deliverables are compared.

Table 1. Course characteristics

Characteristics	SLP	PCU/BIC
Year of study	Senior Business Science students: mostly undergraduates a few postgraduates over the years	All postgraduate diploma students in Management (Tourism, Sport, Marketing and Enterprise Management)
Class size	Averages about 22 students over 4-year period	About 155 students annually
Duration	Semester	Full-year course (3 terms)
Stakeholder involvement		
Internal:	PCU staff only	Inter-departmental within the Faculty of Commerce
External:	Academic and non-academic staff members and external consultants	Small business owner-managers Sponsors; prize-givers and non-academic staff members

Both course collaborations comprise a number of draft products which give rise to a repertoire of final deliverables for target audiences. These are negotiated between partners, in groups and with the various internal and external stakeholders.

Table 2. Course deliverables and mandate

SLP deliverables	SLP mandate
Draft verbal and visual “off the page” products: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindmaps • Topic outlines • Sample illustrations } create/present in class	Student teams investigate UCT’s water energy, waste, transport and landscape/building management policies and practices, comparing them against local/international institutions, the Talloires Declaration and UN Gulf Charter on sustainable development.
Final verbal and visual “on the page” client deliverables: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral reports • Written reports } present to client	
PCU/BIC collaborative project	PCU/BIC mandate
Array of internal and external products and processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter of introduction • MOU & group contract } negotiate terms with stakeholders	The live project investigation involves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selecting a business (SME) • investigating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ people ➢ profit ➢ planet in relation to the SME’s sustainability practices.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft and final report • Mini conference } present to selected business	

4. Results and Discussion of Results

In this section survey findings will look at class demographics, challenges and obstacles that can arise as well as the benefits for all stakeholders: personally, professionally and societally. These have been thematically clustered for ease of comparison. The pedagogical implications are highlighted with a view to improving professional practice in Higher Education (HE)

4.1 Demographics

Over a three-year period (2011-2013) the voluntary questionnaire response rate was 51% and 28% for the SLP and PCU/BIC courses respectively with a much higher 92% and 98% response rate for the reflective blogs . The gender mix averaged over the period comprised a slight female bias (54%) for both courses. Over half the students had English as an additional language (EAL) with a small number of exchange students annually from countries

such as Mauritius, Germany, France, Norway and USA. Besides English, other languages spoken were Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Swahili, Ndebele, Setswana, Sepedi, Shona, Nsenga, isiLozi, Portuguese, French, German, Norwegian and Greek. Although most students on the course were South African, the number of languages in such a relatively small sample is evidence of the cultural diversity within each group.

4.2 Challenges and obstacles

In answer to questions about the drawbacks and obstacles, the following issues were identified. The negative comments ('strongly disagree' and 'disagree') were so minor in the questionnaires as to be negligible.

Table 3. Negative theme percentages

Drawback/obstacle	SLP course	PCU/BIC course
Intimidating course approach	5%	n/a
Poor organisation of course material	n/a	4%
Difficult course material	5%	n/a
Lack of fairness/poor quality of assessment	3%	4%
Lack of engagement with material	3%	8%
Poor learning environment	7%	6%
Irrelevant learning activities	2%	4%
Poor group work and collaboration	4%	7%

In terms of the SLP reflective blogs, team imbalances and ineffective group processes, unavailable (re)sources and pressurized deadlines were also mentioned. There is no doubt that students, especially senior students, enjoy the challenge of a complex and meaningful scenario [2; 19; 20]. However, the challenges around designing and implementing a collaborative approach such as SLP can be a double-edged sword. If certain criteria and conditions are not met due to any number of reasons such as participant disinterest, confusion, anxiety or reticence, the more problematic the situation could become. Two such reflections hint at this difficulty: "Never seen before, new to students, sometimes difficult to pick up method" and "First time always presents difficulties and delays; report structure also new to me." Dobos [21] and Grant [22; 3] found that the more positively challenging the tasks, the greater the sense of accomplishment but the more negatively challenging (heavy workload), the lower the performance. In their paper on the learning environment, Muller and Louw [23] reiterate that academic overload creates heightened stress levels and poor performance. Coupled with this, learning styles differ, classes are never homogeneous and disadvantage still prevails, even at senior level. As another team acknowledged: "We found it quite hard at times to communicate with the sources ... as they were not always available and seemed to have limited time... although we got some referrals. I suppose this happens in real life too

acknowledged and addressed up front and throughout the process [3].

¹ Students on the PCU/BIC course write a reflective letter at the start of the course outlining their hopes and expectations and follow this up with a post-course letter on how they experienced the collaborative live project.

As the scenario approach relies on students to take responsibility for their own learning and outcomes, a fair amount of anxiety may arise during the semester about, as one student put it: "keeping up". Another confessed to having to keep "many balls in the air".

Staff members too are challenged in a number of ways that pertain to workload:

- before to set up the relevant scenario topics in collaboration with external partners,
- during to maintain networking contacts and facilitate the processes and ongoing scaffolding, and
- after to report back sustainability results and collate assessments and reflections.

The time, effort and expertise involved also requires facilitators to keep as many balls in the air as their students which can be as exhilarating as it is daunting.

In terms of the PCU/BIC collaboration, the many structured deliverables of the live research project, especially the turn-around time between each, proved challenging to most students and their teams. Students had to make time to meet and complete their tasks. In their reflections students expressed anxiety, ambivalence with working in teams and frustrations in working with people with different work ethics and cultural backgrounds. One student observed: “In the group I was designated to, the challenges that I came across was that there were three roosters, they all wanted their voices to be heard but had no time to listen to others. That alone was a problem whereas the rest of the group were just being told what to do.” However in the same reflection the student makes this interesting observation: “On drafting the final report of sustainability, I was impressed with the work of all individuals in the group, as each member managed to pull their own weight despite the differences in the group which were later resolved.” Allowing students to work collaboratively in teams makes them realise that problems are not insurmountable and that much can be achieved through cooperation and acknowledging that each member of the team has the potential to add value, given the right climate and opportunity [24; 25].

Just as in the SLP course, time is also an issue as staff members have to plan and liaise with many stakeholders before, during and after each implementation. Staff members are also challenged in terms of their readiness to accept change and incorporate students’ critical feedback into the collaboration and content of the courses. Facilitators also have to convince course administrators that partnering benefits students and helps build dynamic teams and individuals who are ready to impact society positively.

The feedback from business owner-managers is that they sometimes find students naïve especially when they conduct their research. Students take time management for granted – when they make appointments they expect to be helped immediately. They seem unaware that time is money for external parties who are giving of their time and expertise freely. They also sometimes overlook protocols which are stipulated in their MOU with the business owner. However, students soon realise how the real business world operates and to their credit adjust. They acknowledge the importance of the MOU and their own group contract. Likewise on the SLP course, the need to establish group norms and respectful codes of conduct has led to much better accountability and management in subsequent years. Such reality checks prepare students for the responsibilities of conducting business in an environmentally aware and culturally sensitive manner.

In summary, changing bureaucratic mindsets, managing time and overcoming resistance to change are the major challenges presented. Because of the uniqueness of this collaboration between two distinctly different courses on the postgraduate diploma in management, it challenges current practices of courses operating in silos. The PCU/BIC collaboration provides empirical evidence that the “barriers” or “boundaries” between disciplines stifle innovation and creativity among students. In a sense the PCU/BIC collaboration allows for curricula symbiosis – each course in the collaboration is enriched and students are able to see the bigger picture of life instead of compartmentalised knowledge.

4.3 Benefits and advantages

In answer to questions about benefits and advantages, the following positive themes were identified ('strongly agreed' and 'agreed'). Similar themes emerged in the reflective blogs and letters.

Table 4. Positive theme percentages

Benefit/advantage	SLP course	PCU/BIC course
Scaffolded professional communication practices	92%	79%
Realistic scenario	90%	n/a
Experiential, collaborative learning and teaching	100%	88%
Fun and freedom in learning	65%	n/a
Motivation to learn	n/a	89%

Classroom observation, student and staff survey findings and student reflections have overwhelmingly shown that this pedagogical approach seems a win-win situation for all. In terms of SLP, all respondents over the period 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that a negotiated and collaborative pedagogy such as this provides "authentic", "real-life", "hands-on" "participative experiences" and "useful", "relevant" and "invaluable" problem-solving skills. Another common refrain was the effectiveness of draft products and processes before final deliverables to minimise inadequate preparation and quality as well as procrastination. "The idea of splitting up the work into a series of steps, each introduced by an afternoon workshop made it easier to split up the specific investigation into smaller subtopics.... The rough diagram we produced was a good starting point even though the topic outline changed as we learnt more about the content we'd be using." Teams also realised the usefulness of such an approach to other course work. "I see the benefit in the mindmapping and in the development of a topic outline (I have begun using these techniques myself!)." "I enjoyed the structure of this course and found a lot of the process information beneficial in my other courses."

Although students realise that this is a communication course, they acknowledge that the use of scenarios not only adds another knowledge dimension but contextualises their learning in "meaningful" and "insightful" ways: "I believe the communication skills I have learnt will stand me in good stead for the remainder of my life." "I learn extra skills that I will take with me and put to good use in the future which I hope will make a difference as a professional." In terms of the focus on sustainable business practices at the university, the idea of being a corporate citizen soon took hold with students' growing belief in self as active participants keenly willing to "play [their] part". "[I]t boosts our morale knowing that we are working on something real...of which we can provide some added value." "[D]oing work for the university in particular [and through] further research we would be able to see the benefits of our work on a place that we spend many days at throughout the year."

Related to the above, many students mentioned that the approach and their team "journey" was "fun" allowing for "humour", flourishing (often new) "friendships", deeper "personal insights", one student stating that he felt a more "all-rounded" person as a result of this project. Students also mentioned how their "curiosity" and "interest" were aroused and their appreciation of the "autonomy", "independence" and "freedom" to learn at their own pace and be accountable for their own progress and ideas. "When most Commerce courses focus on a student's ability to interpret other individual's facts, it was refreshing to be a part of a course that wanted to know my interpretation of certain facts."

External consultants too realised the multi-layered pedagogical achievements made possible through SLP: “Through the research the students undertake, sometimes comprising interviews and surveys, they not only increase their own understanding of these issues, but very importantly, raise awareness and understanding amongst the UCT community...to education and communication around sustainability.” A further comment confirmed the local and global importance of sustainability and the role of education. “[This] should be a priority of any higher education institution that seeks to prepare their students for the future challenges around environmental degradation...From the feedback I have obtained from the students, I am convinced that [they] do develop their knowledge and commitment to environmental sustainability... The focus of student research topics on the context surrounding them is a powerful means of education and change towards a more sustainable campus and society...”

Similar sentiments were expressed about the PCU/BIC collaboration. Students reflected that they are able to apply the knowledge and skills they learnt from these collaborative courses in their other diploma courses. They see the PCU/BIC collaboration as a sound academic activity which integrates knowledge: “[H]aving a collaborative report from the two courses instead of two separate reports, allowed for the most important factors to be taken from both courses and applied into a single, focused document.” Another refrain is that the collaboration provides tools for academic writing, effective communication and intercultural sensitivity. Students found the MAP FOR CCC helpful in their other courses: “On a more personal level the map for crystal clear communication aided me on numerous occasions throughout the semester. I believe it added clarity and consistency to all my academic writing”. Moving beyond academic writing to more professional written, team and oral deliverables also appealed: “Although they may not realise it now, the report writing skills learnt throughout the sustainability project will serve this year’s postgraduate diploma students well in the future. Further, the placing of students in groups served as a quick learning curve for people with regard to group dynamics and people management. Lastly, the presentation at the culmination of the project greatly added to the multi-disciplined approach of the course and the skills learnt.”

The group contract fosters a sense of identity and students reflected that it enhanced “role allocation” and “delegated authority”. Another common refrain through the reflective letters were lessons learnt from the process of completing the live research project. “After having been through the process of writing a sustainability report on a real-life company, the group in general felt a sense of accomplishment and reward”. Completing the live research project enhanced “the self-confidence of students” as they were “able to see how the real world operates”. Without exception students indicated they have grown academically, socially and also in terms of intercultural know-how and synergy. They now know that in the real business world team work is important and that all members of a team bring something unique to the team.

Respondents found the two sponsored prizes for the ‘Best Team Report’ and ‘Best Speaker’ to be an innovation of the PCU/BIC collaboration that motivated group members to deliver quality written and oral reports. In a sense the prizes reinforced team ethos, promoted excellence and helped students to focus. Some comments were: “it gives the groups something to work for other than just a certain mark” and “it encourages teamwork”.

The role of course convenors and other facilitators teaching in this collaboration was acknowledged with appreciation. The refrain that stood out is the “passion of the lecturers” their “willingness to assist students” especially students for whom English is an additional language (EAL). The PCU/BIC collaboration is seen as beneficial because of its practical nature: “The learning that takes place on these courses feels real ... as you walk out of the lecture you are able to start applying what you have learnt to your everyday life.” Students felt inspired

by both the facilitators and the philosophy behind the collaboration of the two courses. This quote stands out: “I am still truly inspired by the efforts of the convenors in finding two courses that go together so well, they enable the strengthening of the skills sets needed for tomorrow's entrepreneurs to successfully make a difference in our beautiful country.” Students were unanimous that the two courses exceeded their expectations because they taught them to “step back and assess situations before acting”. Once again the tripartite approach of “plan-execute-evaluate” formed the basis of the impact the PCU/BIC collaboration had on the overall diploma of the students.

5. Conclusion and Avenues for Further Research

The analysis of classroom moments, surveys and participant reflections has raised a number of important educational and strategic issues. Firstly, by being involved in real investigations, students learn both explicitly and implicitly how to conduct a live research project and select various research methodologies. Secondly, their work on sustainability and the triple bottom line has produced an unforeseen but positive consequence in that existing scenario experts and SME owners have volunteered their future services and willingness to recruit new contacts. “I offer our support in any further projects we could help assist the UCT students” was an unsolicited comment from one business owner. This networking continues to broaden the panel of experts, business owners, sponsors and prize-givers and raises the profile of both courses and a pedagogy which privileges collaboration and negotiation. Thirdly, the ‘experts’ and real businesses have acknowledged pedagogical reciprocity and how meaning-making and learning is negotiated collaboratively. A business owner acknowledged that he and his co-workers have learnt a great deal from the students: “Being a fairly new company, [we] found the report successful in analyzing parts of the business that lacked focus. [It] gave constructive solutions which we will be implementing in the coming months.” This reinforces the point about a dialogical co-construction of knowledge. By congratulating students on their “engaged” attitudes and “impressive” findings, they boost student confidence still further, creating a meaningful experience to take forward into the workplace as a contribution to life-long learning. Finally, by focusing on higher education responsibilities for sustainable futures, external parties reinforce the need to select scenarios and projects that are perceived as “valuable” and “worthwhile” beyond the classroom. As communication work is so often perceived as ‘soft’ and of minor consideration, embedding courses in “practical” and “job-relevant” contexts enhances the salience and status of both the subject matter and the issues surrounding sustainability.

In terms of the PCU/BIC collaboration, facilitators are convinced that the students’ collaborative research project is a typical illustration of how academia and business can collaborate to enhance innovative and sustainable business practices. Firstly, ‘minding the gap’ and secondly, narrowing it when and wherever possible provides students with opportunities to broaden their professional horizons in class and bridge the transition from the classroom to the workplace.

In the wake of the financial crisis – or perhaps that should be ‘midst’ as it seems ongoing – HE has a significant role to play in the development of a new social paradigm of awareness, individual and collective care and emerging professional communication and identity. It is a mutual responsibility and neither the public nor private sector can or should attempt to ‘go it alone’. The foundation of globalisation should be global sustainability where both first and third world interests are sacrosanct in partnership; ‘the common good’ should be the cornerstone of developing professional practices and educational know-how [3].

Researchers the world over agree that skilled business graduates of today will all too soon find themselves in senior management positions making critical decisions related to the environmental and social impacts of their chosen enterprises. If they espouse a commitment and conviction to grapple with critical issues and build their businesses sustainably, real strides are possible in future generations globally [16; 4].

Avenues for further research are many and relate to curriculum development. As academics and practitioners, our role in helping to shape young minds is small and of short duration. As these commerce students do not major in communication studies per se, trying to develop ‘staying power’ in their minds is a worthy pursuit [3]. The avenues of further research listed here are a means to further contribute to this goal. They include:

- extending innovative scenario and collaborative pedagogical approaches to undergraduate professional communication courses for comparative purposes;
- introducing this type of collaborative project to other programmes as an integral teaching and learning approach, rather than ‘standalone’ courses, to create more buy-in and visibility across various domains;
- focusing more on curricula, the ‘what’ of teaching as well as the ‘how’ (pedagogy) to ensure seamless alignment and on-going relevance in a changing society;
- evaluating assessment practices and whether grades improve overall (anecdotal evidence has suggested that they do but no real quantitative/longitudinal evidence has been collated and analysed);
- undertaking collaborative research with other universities (local and international) using global scenarios of mutual interest and/or SMEs beyond our borders; and
- injecting more digital scope and blended learning which may go hand in hand with the above to extend the reach and penetration of collaborative partnering and sustainability.

If pedagogical innovation and curricular relevance are closely aligned and recognised as such – not only by staff but also by students – then greater institutional and societal ‘buy-in’ seems possible as students reflect on long-term and more broadly-based know-how, negotiated meaning making and professional communication practices apt for a rapidly changing global economy [3].

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