

Education for Empathy and Social Responsibility

by Alexander Nanni and Joseph Serrani (Mahidol University, Thailand)

Introduction

University students often become business majors with one goal in mind: to become wealthy. While there is nothing wrong with this goal per se, it sometimes results in business people's neglect of the needs of the society that surrounds them and of the environment that sustains them. For this reason, there is a need for aspiring business leaders to broaden their understanding of the role of business beyond the financial bottom line.

This article briefly presents a project designed to enhance EFL students' language skills as well as their understanding of the triple bottom line (TBL), a framework created by John Elkington (1994) to evaluate businesses in terms of their financial, environmental, and social impacts. We have implemented this project in the upper-intermediate course of an intensive *English for Academic Purposes* program where the majority of students plan to major in business or hospitality. By aligning our educational goals with students' interest in business, we have been able to create a project that students find relevant and rewarding in terms of both language and content.

The project has several components. After completing and discussing core readings about the three aspects of the TBL, each student in the class is assigned a different multinational business. The teachers provide a research and writing plan that spans the 10-week course. With the teacher's guidance, each student researches the overall sustainability of his or her assigned company by investigating its performance in terms of the three facets of the TBL: people, planet, and profit. The students share their findings via presentations, small-group discussions, and an extended essay.

Of the three aspects of the TBL, we have found that students tend to have the least concern for social responsibility. The TBL emphasizes the responsibility that businesses have to consider the effects of their actions on all members of society, not only shareholders; however, students often fail to empathize with individuals affected at different stages of the supply chain.

To help students consider social impacts from diverse points of view (employees, community members, etc.), we use the following approaches to teaching empathy:

- **Radical empathy:** Inspired by Mulvey & Richards (2007), this approach involves discussing perceptions and beliefs, including beliefs about

class and race that are often avoided. Participants are asked to consider the situation from viewpoints other than their own with the goal of better understanding diverse perspectives.

- **Vignettes:** Inspired by Gair (2013), this approach involves researching the experiences of individuals and telling their stories. These stories tend to have more of an emotional impact than statistics alone as the students can understand the actors on a more human level.
- **Endangered cultures:** Inspired by Davis (2009), this approach involves developing students' understanding of the importance of cultural diversity and of the ongoing process of culture loss. Loss of cultures impoverishes the "ethnosphere" and reduces humanity's resilience in the face of emerging global issues.

Since we first implemented this project over 4 years ago, we have found it effective in enhancing students' language skills, critical thinking skills, and awareness of social responsibility. We would encourage teachers who are interested in project-based learning to give the TBL project a try, or, depending on context, to implement some of the empathy-building activities described above.

Further information — including readings, teaching materials and useful links — is available on-line at our website <tinyurl.com/gileempathy>.

References

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- Mulvey, L. L., & Richards, S. M. (2007, June). Thoughts on a conversational approach to race relations. *Sociological Forum, 22*(2), 220-226.

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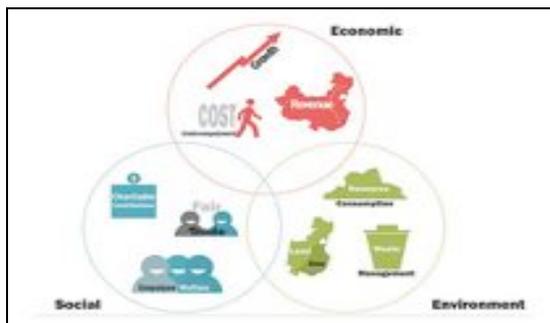
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The Triple Bottom Line

The *Triple Bottom Line* (TBL or 3BL) is a framework created by John Elkington in 1994 that encourages companies and organizations to evaluate their impact according to 3 criteria: *social, environmental and financial*. TBL is the result of 50 years of activism by environmentalists and social activists who argued for the need to go beyond a narrow profit mentality. If a mining company, for example, earns a healthy profit but their asbestos mines cause thousands of deaths and their copper mines pollute local rivers, then the government ends up spending tax-payers' money on health care and on river clean-up. (Source: Wikipedia)



Sample Companies Profiled by Students

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coca Cola (USA) ▪ Mitsubishi (Japan) ▪ SingTel (Singapore) ▪ CMBC (China) ▪ Scotiabank (Canada) ▪ FEMSA (Mexico) ▪ Petrobras (Brazil) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Merck (Germany) ▪ Lloyds Bank (UK) ▪ KIA Motors (Korea) ▪ ENI (Italy) ▪ Rosneft (Russia) ▪ L'Oreal (France) ▪ Tata Motors (India) |
|---|---|

Student Quotes about the Project

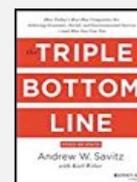
- *How much our world has been destroying... How can we help the world.*
- *It help me know about business.*
- *Knowledge about TBL, I could apply this framework in my own company in the future.*
- *I learn about how many international companies treat to their employees.*
- *Knowing that some companies treat people unfair and do not care about the environment.*
- *It's good to gain interesting aspects from many famous companies and know about impacts that they make.*
- *It is inspiring and interesting to know why company needs TBL? Answer is to run their business with profits. Do not be evil.*
- *It inspires students to have more responsibility toward their duties when they own a business.*



The Triple Bottom Line

by Andrew Savitz (2013) \$21

This classic book explains how today's best-run companies are achieving economic, social and environmental success by using a TBL approach to their businesses.



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