



Physically Provoking Collaborative Sense Making in Business Education

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Abstract

This paper presents and evaluates a series of attempts to introduce elements of design thinking to business and engineering university courses. Across a range of courses at Bachelors, Masters and PhD level we have been exploring how abstract management concepts and business dilemmas may be brought to life through activities deploying tangible artefacts as representations of organisations, processes and situations. This has involved challenging students to make representations of a company's important internal and external relationships, and substituting objects for words to make three dimensional variants of imminent frameworks for describing business logic, and experimenting with designing interactive sculptures to provoke new perspectives on challenges a business faces / business dilemmas. We report upon the diverse reactions of students and our commercial partners to this tangible innovation teaching. Supplementing theory and words with tangible objects appears to have value particularly within our more international and multidisciplinary classrooms. The limitations of these forms of representations have been found to be as provoking for the students as the strengths. We have experimented with a variety of physical materials and scales, but focus particularly in this paper on our use of a bespoke collection of metallic objects. These educational activities arose from and fed back into a national research centre's work on participatory innovation and we also present reflections upon the advantages and disadvantages of bringing research and teaching into such close proximity. We propose criteria to aid other educators in choosing between using artefacts and more traditional approaches and make recommendations for how to effectively facilitate "teaching with tangibles" activities.