

VISIT TO HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL:
FOUNDATIONS CAPSTONE COMMITTEE

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Editor's note: The five writers visited Harvard Business School (HBS) for one week in February 2009.

Shawn Randall—Department of Art

After returning from a week at HBS, I really stopped to analyze my own courses. I had been particularly impressed with the role of teaching groups at HBS, the preparation that goes into every class period and every case, and the proactive approach to teacher evaluations.

I felt an amazing sense of family at HBS. The students seemed to really be there to help each other (for the most part). They knew each other intimately. Somehow the individuals seemed to understand the value of everyone else in their class. They are deliberately forging relationships that will benefit them as they go out to work in different industries. At the same time, they were willing to challenge each other in respectful ways and with great maturity. They know how to disagree respectfully and without attacking the other person. They were also willing to question their teachers' opinions and points of view as well. I think because the students were so prepared, the teachers had to be on their toes.

I believe this great unity I sensed was due to the teaching groups. At the teaching group meeting, the teacher who authored the case would discuss the teaching plan, and each of the faculty had not only read but brought their own research and knowledge so that the writer of the case was not defending but sculpting her case. Each brought years of experience in the classroom and the industry to bear so that cases were well-organized and planned for the classroom experience. As a result, teachers and students were on the same page; each had a shared goal and objective each day, something they reflected on and discussed after class together. This connection across classes only worked to strengthen the ability of students to help and learn from each other. I sensed the respect and willingness to work out issues on the part of both students and faculty.

Many times as teachers and learners we become victims of our own habits. We are comfortable teaching or learning our way, but there is so much we can learn from others. A shared curriculum allows a more synergistic approach to learning. HBS teachers brought their own personality and examples to the cases, but stayed to the generally agreed upon direction and "pastures" for the cases—a flexible structure. Some teachers I watched stuck to the board plan. Others let the class direct

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the discussion and made sure to touch on the key concepts from the agreed-upon teaching plan. Teachers were also able to help students bring real life experiences and concepts to bear in ways that brought the cases into each student's personal life. Each got to the same place eventually, and each was able to teach according to his or her personal style. The teachers got to the meat of the issue quickly so that the hour they spent in class was incredibly efficient.

The teachers really functioned as guides in the classroom. They came across as seasoned veterans of the cases. They were ready, it seemed, for anything the students brought up. They were seen as, and in many cases are, leaders in their field. Many acknowledged that some case materials fell outside their expertise, but they still had a deep enough understanding of the material to help students reason through and discover the answers to their own questions. There was a lot of peer teaching happening in class.

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The only thing I found missing was an opportunity for students to reflect on what they learned. There was no summary or final recapping or calling upon past knowledge. Once a case was taught it went into the proverbial case graveyard. I wish the students could have reacted after the class discussions. I think it would have brought a higher level of relevance and application to the knowledge they discussed in the cases.

The teaching group is an important background to what happens in HBS classrooms, but behind the teaching group was an impressive amount of effort that goes into writing an HBS case. The professor presenting the case in the teaching group I observed had interviewed parties involved in the scandal/situation, had insider information both off- and on-record, and knew the heads of companies by first name. These cases take months to years and significant financial investment to bring to the students. One reason I think the students are so invested in the learning process is that they know the amount of time and resources that go into each class they attend. If we cared about each day we taught and invested a fraction of the time and thought and effort that went into the classes I observed at HBS, our students would have much richer experiences. This might trickle down to the students and be reflected in their participation and effort in the class.

Finally, I was impressed with the proactive approach to peer and student evaluations. An independent organization helps teachers review video tapes of their classes and analyze and make sense of their student evaluations. Teachers feel a sense (from what I gathered) that the school isn't there to attack them, but rather to enable them to teach better. HBS has made the process of reviewing student evaluations a less ominous and painful experience by helping the faculty see patterns and create lists of

action items based on student reviews. This way they can use them as a way to actually improve their teaching.

Jason Hunt—Department of Biology

You may ask the same question I did: what could a human physiologist, a scientist, learn from a week at HBS? I was skeptical. As I expected, a week sitting through business classes at HBS confirmed my choice to never take a business course. But I was wrong to think HBS had nothing to offer me. Aside from the subject of business, the visit was an eye-opening experience. I learned lessons about two topics that stand out in my mind: renewed appreciation and unity.

The first lesson I learned within the first five minutes of arriving on the campus. We were scheduled to meet in the Baker Library/Bloomberg Center. We arrived early and took advantage of the time by walking around the center. Shortly we came across a 10-foot painting of President Kim Clark hanging on the wall. As I looked around at the other paintings of past presidents I began to understand the historical significance of the Harvard Business School and quickly gained a renewed appreciation for President Clark. I remember thinking to myself, if I had a 10-foot painting of myself on the wall of HBS, I'll bet my wife couldn't even stand my arrogance. I then reflected on my own life and how foolish and prideful I have been from time to time thinking that giving up a "potential" career in research was a sacrifice in order to come and work at BYU-Idaho. I became painfully aware of my small achievements and humbly aware of the blessing of working at BYU-Idaho.

The most important lesson I learned while observing the faculty at HBS was the power of a unified teaching group. Arguably, HBS faculty are among the top minds in the nation: The week before our meeting, Professor Robert Pozen had been advising President Obama on the financial situation of the United States. Still, with all their experience, these professors have embraced HBS's educational approach. Faculty emphasized the importance of consistency among sections, and student learning was their top priority. I watched a teaching group discuss and debate for two hours—in the late evening—the objectives and outline of the next week's lecture without getting contentious. For example, I heard one faculty member say to another something like: I don't agree with this approach, but if you feel that this is the best approach, I'll do my best to follow it. I have seen this power, on occasion, at BYU-Idaho where teaching groups apply the Learning Model in a unified way, but not nearly enough.

Consistency among sections contributed to the unity at HBS, and I noticed two important results: First, I saw students benefiting from

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discussing the same case outside of class with students from different sections. Second, as a group observing, we were able to discuss the cases and what we saw with a lot of consistency even though we each observed a different professor. There was a lot of power in being able to do that.

Observing this unified approach has changed my approach with my colleagues at BYU–Idaho. One of the courses I teach is Human Anatomy and Physiology which, on average, covers 20 sections and is spread among nine faculty members. Each section is supposed to be similar in content and approach. I have never been happy with the textbook and have always pushed to use a different one. However, since visiting HBS, I recognize that commonality and consistency among sections is more important than my own individual biases. This lesson is becoming increasingly relevant as I participate in multiple sections of Foundations courses. Individuality is important, but there is great strength in unity.

I left HBS excited about the possibilities at BYU–Idaho. If faculty and employees at BYU–Idaho can renew their appreciation, set aside their personal biases, and unify under our mission statement, the Learning Model, and the Foundations program, we will truly become a Disciple Preparation Center.

Brian Schmidt—Department of Instructional Development

During the first class I observed at HBS, I sensed something was different. The professor was carefully placing his lesson plan on his desk and students were pulling out their notes. When it was time for class to start, a hush came over the room, and all ninety students were at attention. These people were serious about the classroom experience—certainly more serious than I had been with my classes in graduate school. I was even more impressed when the students clapped after I had been introduced as a visiting guest. I felt rather special. I learned later that they welcome every visitor this way. It is simply part of their culture.

This culture made a lasting impression upon me. Both students and faculty were intensely focused on learning and teaching. This environment is not easy to describe in a few paragraphs, but a few themes might illustrate a portion of what I observed: preparation, participation, and pedagogy.

Preparation was clearly evident when I looked at the notes of the student sitting next to me. These were not handwritten notes on a yellow pad. Rather, she had typed and printed the key ideas and concepts she found in the reading along with her analysis and questions. Other students across the room had similar notes. I later learned from her that this was her second set of notes. She had typed these notes after meeting with her

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study group. Clearly, students had a sense that preparation was critical in the learning process.

The participation by other students made it clear that the student next to me was not the only person who came to class so well prepared. Students were ready to engage in a conversation—not only with the professor, but with each other. With every question, dozens of hands were raised. Students articulated well-supported arguments and shared pertinent insights. They asked provocative questions. Students had no problem challenging each other’s positions. Nor did they openly take offense by their peers or professor pushing them on their position. Rather, the issues were respectfully addressed. Amazingly, this amount of participation and engagement was evident in every class I observed.

The case method was clearly one cause for the amount of student engagement. This pedagogy poses problems that push students to take a stand. Students must study and identify issues, analyze facts, then come to a conclusion. The stakes become even higher as students are asked to defend their positions in front of their peers. Students are willing to invest significantly in their preparation because they don’t want to look foolish in front of their classmates. In class, students can take their understanding to a deeper level as they discuss opposing viewpoints.

The culture that was created at HBS through the case method was palatable to me. In a matter of seconds, I sensed how serious faculty and students were about learning and teaching. Although HBS students were older and more mature than our undergraduates, I came away wondering how we could better foster student engagement at BYU–Idaho. I don’t think we have to use the case method to create this culture. I have seen many other collaborative instructional methods used at BYU–Idaho (concept tests, jigsaws, problem-based learning, etc.) that have achieved similar results. All of these instructional methods rely heavily on principles articulated in our Learning Model. I hope that as we collectively apply principles of the Learning Model at BYU–Idaho we can similarly develop and deepen a culture of learning and teaching.

Ross Baron—Department of Religious Education

One of the startling things I observed during my experience at HBS that has dramatically changed my approach to teaching was the buy-in on the part of professors, administration, and students to the HBS method of teaching and learning. I say startling because I had falsely imagined that professors at HBS were all major egos who, having come from successful careers in business or academia, would all be doing their own thing in the classroom with their own approaches. In addition, I had falsely thought that the students, who are the *crème de la crème*,

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would not be submissive to a one-track approach to learning with an all pervasive culture. I witnessed the opposite.

In the classroom, students were actively engaged in their learning, and surprisingly to me, engaged and committed to the learning of their fellow students. In my conversations with the students I asked pointed questions about the case method and its pros and cons. I received candid and open answers. Overall, the students were convinced of the value of their experience and were advocates of its use.

I observed a teaching group of about ten to twelve professors working together at an intense level on an upcoming lesson. Two of the professors presented some of the factual material as they went through the upcoming case—that took about fifteen minutes. The next hour and forty-five minutes were spent discussing the best way to deliver the material: the best questions to ask, the best media to use, and the best approach to the case. I did not see any positioning on the part of senior professors. In fact, I saw a group of professionals trying their best to truly help and teach students. There was no angst or hand-wringing about the case method or about the mission of HBS. The faculty was united in their attempt to deliver material within the HBS framework that would be most beneficial to the students.

My reflection about how I could translate what I observed at HBS to my responsibilities at BYU–Idaho led me to two major conclusions. First, while I was watching the students in class participate, I realized that their questions and responses were at a very high level; there was an electricity in the air and an excitement about learning. The following idea struck me forcibly: our students can do that and we can have this experience! I felt more committed to the Learning Model at BYU–Idaho and the concept of preparing, teaching one another, and pondering and proving. Careful thought on the part of the teacher about better ways to have students prepare is absolutely essential in helping students have that kind of experience in and out of the classroom. In addition, teacher expectations at HBS were high, and the students met that expectation. This led to an upward cycle of mutually reinforced expectations: teachers to students and then students to teachers.

Second, the commitment to a unified teaching approach on the part of the professors did not create sameness but a powerful union. Perhaps the idea of a unified teaching approach scares some professors who think that that will create a stultifying sameness. However, sameness is different than union; sameness can be outward, superficial, and stale. It can also be defined as an absence of variety and monotonous. Sameness, I believe, can become the counterfeit for union or unity. The concept of union is inward, deep, refreshing, and enlivening. Additionally, and most importantly, true union must come by and be maintained through

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the power of the Holy Ghost. One person said it this way, “Achieving unanimity in Church and family councils [or at BYU–Idaho] is not the same as honoring the will of the majority, reaching a compromise, or brokering a deal.... These practices, while acceptable in many secular settings, are rooted in the inherently horizontal convergence of varied points through negotiation and give-and-take, and as such they fail to recognize the supremacy of a third fundamental party—the Lord.¹

BYU–Idaho is blessed with direction from prophets and seers and the gift and power of the Holy Ghost. Embracing unity will create an environment where deep learning and change can take place both in the learner and the teacher.

Rhonda Seamons—Department of English

It had been one of those end-of-semester department gatherings that involved eating, so spirits were high. Several small groups lingered in the lobby of Rigby Hall, deeply engrossed in separate yet lively conversations. I was seated on an uncomfortably low-slung chair along the outer wall, trying to balance my plate on my knees while I finished dessert. I was chatting with two of our newer faculty members, when a boisterous voice from a folding table by the vending machines called out, “So, Rhonda, do *you* think it’s like *The Music Man*?”

English faculty members love using metaphors—and I hadn’t actually been listening to the other group’s conversation—so I really didn’t know what I was supposed to be comparing to a musical I had last seen in 1980. “Do I think *what* is like *The Music Man*?” I countered cautiously.

“The Learning Model,” was the unexpected reply. “You’ve just spent a week at the Harvard Business School. Do you think there’s anything to the case method—or is this whole Learning Model thing just like the ‘think method’ Professor Hill used in *The Music Man*?”

There was quite a bit of laughter, after which I assured my friends that the case method was *real*. It obviously wasn’t the *only* method, and it wasn’t necessarily the *best* method. But it certainly was a *real* method. My colleagues were intrigued by my answer, and they quickly shuffled the chairs and tables to accommodate all who remained in a single circle. We then spent close to an hour talking about the pros and cons of various teaching methods and my impressions of HBS.

The format of our discussion was rather like an interrogation, and it was sprinkled with the kind of comments one might expect from a literate and slightly feisty group. While I cannot recall all of the questions, I remember that my colleagues were stunned to learn that the teaching teams at HBS create lesson plans for each day that are blocked into specific discussion “pastures” with recommended time limits for each.

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They were almost aghast to hear that everyone teaches the same lesson on the same day in the same way. And several actually shook their heads in disbelief when I said the method was extremely powerful and certainly had a place in our curriculum. It was a fun discussion which introduced some novel concepts.

A few days later, Karen Holt, our department chair, asked if I would take an hour at our department's spring retreat to demonstrate the case method. I asked if her request came as a result of the interrogation in the lobby the previous week. Karen didn't seem to know what I was talking about; she said she just felt the department members should be exposed to the methodology that would be used in the Foundations Capstone course, which (at that point in time) was slated to replace the advanced writing and critical thinking course which the English Department had taught as part of the old General Education program. I chuckled and accepted her invitation.

Over the next few weeks, I put together a reading packet for my colleagues based on some of the materials which Sandra Sucher had shared with me during the week I spent at Harvard. Professor Sucher is the current team leader for the Leadership and Corporate Accountability course at HBS, and she is in the process of developing a module on discrimination. Professor Sucher has been collecting true stories from HBS students who have been mistreated because of their race, sex, or religion—and she has woven the stories together in a provocative discussion on whether, when, and how a person should confront discrimination.

On the appointed day in May, with my colleagues seated in the traditional HBS horseshoe shape, I began the lesson just as it was scripted in the HBS lesson plan. Within minutes, my colleagues were drawn into a lively discussion. They began challenging one another's answers, posing questions of their own, and deliberating ways that the case method was similar to something they already did. Several expressed surprise that the discussion felt spontaneous, even though it stayed within the pastures that Professor Sucher had outlined.

Those faculty members who had been present for the interrogation in April were particularly fascinated by the demonstration lesson; they felt it was an enlightening experience to see the methodology in action. Most of them said they really liked what they saw. During lunch, several colleagues made a beeline for my table to continue probing about the benefits of the methodology, the specifics about how to organize the student learning teams, and the procedures used to create the unified lesson plans.

Ultimately, the English Department has been asked to create an advanced writing and critical thinking course once again. Since Kip Hartvigsen is leading the development team, his work on "Thinking

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about Thinking” will undoubtedly influence the materials that emerge. And, even though Kip is a lover of musical theatre, I am certain his “think method” will have quite a bit more substance than Professor Hill’s.

Of course, BYU-Idaho still plans to offer the Foundations Capstone course using the case method. We have been striving to develop a standard syllabus, course outline, and set of cases. Oh, what finally gets implemented probably won’t look exactly like the case methodology utilized at HBS, but we are certainly employing many of the principles that have been so well-articulated and refined by them. And I am grateful to have had the opportunity to observe some of the finest HBS teachers in action; it has enriched my understanding of the method. ☺

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NOTE

1 Fernando Castro in an unpublished paper titled “Unity.”