

Spring 2015 Semester Closing Note to My Students

By Don Sutherland

At the end of each semester, I provide my students with a closing note about the course. That note seeks to place the course, its content, and its requirements into a larger context. I do so, because I believe it is helpful for students to have one last opportunity to understand why they took the course and perhaps better identify what they might have gained from the course. Such understanding can perhaps reinforce learning for the long-term.

Below is the note to my spring 2015 students:

Dear Student,

With the semester nearing its conclusion, it is a good time to share some thoughts and insights to place this course into a larger context.

At least a few found the exercise in asymmetric information, the simulation asking students to make a range of choices from maintaining a status quo strategy to pursuing an acquisition, and the research paper more than a little challenging. The introduction of uncertainty, absence of simple timeless formulas, and scarcity of precise solutions was never intended to inflict “cruel and unusual punishment.” Instead, those activities were intended to expose you to the kind of often messy and sometimes chaotic situations that exist outside the confines of the classroom.

If one looks at the world today, what does one find? One sees complexity, uncertainty, and change.

Geopolitical assumptions and the balance of power are in flux. Rapidly developing economies in parts of Asia and Latin America are producing a range of challenges and opportunities for American and multinational firms. Companies are disappearing while new businesses are being established. In virtually every sector of society, new knowledge is being created all the while the costs of data storage and dissemination are declining.

In this environment, apps and widespread access to information put the kind of power into one’s hands that only a small handful of people in the past could possess. Smartphones and tablets have made all of us “Superheroes” in some sense of the term. Nevertheless, precisely because the world in which we live is filled with complexity, uncertainty, and change, access to information and the latest apps is not enough.

Students nearing graduation, employees, managers, business owners, and leaders need an intellectual foundation that helps them make sense of the ever shifting world. They need a framework for systematically examining, analyzing, and addressing problems when information is incomplete or ambiguous and worse, when deadlines are relatively short. They need an understanding of where they can find the relevant information needed to apply that framework. They need strong written and oral communication skills to become effective managers and leaders. They need a capacity for continual learning.

Back on January 5, 2015, David Tuffey, lecturer in Applied Ethics and Sociotechnical Studies at Griffith University, wrote a provocative essay in *The Washington Post* entitled, “**In 10 years, your job probably won’t exist.**” How comforting is that to the student who is nearing graduation or already in the midst of a career?

Tuffey advised:

To position yourself favorably for the jobs of the future, become someone who can look at problems in unorthodox ways, seeing different angles and finding workable solutions.

Be a multi-disciplinary, insatiably curious person who knows how to use the tools to model ideas and create prototypes...

[Y]ou...have a strong conscience and can operate outside your comfort zone to achieve win-win outcomes.

This course provided an opportunity under which the attentive student should have been able to nurture the intellectual framework and capacities necessary for long-term success. I know that some of the work was challenging and might even have led some of you to doubt yourselves.

One should never be discouraged by difficulty or setbacks. Perhaps world record sprinter Usain Bolt put it best after Jamaica’s 4 X 100 meter relay team suffered a rare defeat nearly two years ago when he explained, “I take every loss as a learning curve.” It is challenge and adversity, far more than sustained comfort (remember the concept of strategic or structural inertia?), that can push one beyond what one might otherwise ever attempt, much less achieve.

Following the end of this class, it will be up to each student to build upon that framework from future study, career progress, and/or life experience. This course was not about grades. It was about cultivating some of the skills, knowledge, and abilities you will need to succeed during your life’s journey.

Now, if any of you want that mythical “good grade,” I will certainly wish you success in attaining it. I hope that you will leave this class with some lasting knowledge and, even more importantly, build upon that knowledge in the years ahead.

Good luck and best wishes to all.