

Educating Senior Executives in a Novel Strategic Paradigm: Early Experiences of the Sustainable Enterprise Academy

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the introduction of 'sustainability' as a novel strategic paradigm to senior executive learning. Specifically, we describe the Sustainable Enterprise Academy, an executive education initiative founded by the Schulich School of Business at York University (Canada) with the active support of a number of academic collaborators, five corporations and several business and civil society organizations. The Academy is dedicated to business transformation through the application of a strategic sustainability paradigm, which assumes the desirability of business simultaneously creating economic, social and environmental value. The paper recounts the Academy's journey between 1999 and 2003, during which time five successful senior executive Business Leader Seminars were held – four in Canada and one in the US. Evaluation data from participants are presented and lessons learned described. The paper also explores future avenues of development for the Academy. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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MANY SCHOLARS IN THE LITERATURE ON MANAGEMENT LEARNING HAVE DESCRIBED THE imperative of providing real-world learning opportunities that transcend the theoretical or the academically self-reinforcing (Goleman, 1998; Hambrick, 1994; Kayes, 2003; Wenger, 1998). One way of achieving this is to offer inter-disciplinary, action-learning and experiential styles of education, which do not seek to reduce complexity or eliminate paradox (Senge *et al.*, 1994, 1997). Mintzberg and Gosling (2002) describe one novel executive development program in 'practicing management', which they describe as reaching beyond globalization, beyond managerial functions and even beyond classrooms. In relating the experiences of a successful joint venture of five

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1 business schools worldwide in delivering meaningful executive management education 'beyond
2 borders', they stress the importance of striking an effective balance between a number of tensions. These
3 tensions included balancing the global and the local, reflection and action, cooperation and competition
4 and the conceptual and the concrete.

5 Recent developments in management learning theory and practice reflect attempts at successfully bal-
6 ancing such complex, diverse and paradoxical tensions. The literature on management learning has wit-
7 nessed an increase in distinctive approaches, theories and assumptions to designing and implementing
8 ³ management education programs. Kayes (2003) offers a typology that organizes the current emerging
9 directions in the field of management learning. These include action approaches that focus on needed
10 behavioral changes (Revans, 1980; Schon, 1983), cognitive–transformational approaches (Goleman,
11 ⁴ 1998; Klein, 1998; Wenger, 1987), reflective approaches (Welsh and Murray, 2003; Reynolds, 1999),
12 ⁵ and experiential approaches to learning (Kolb, 1984; Reason, 1994). Common among these approaches
13 is the recognition of the multiple, competing demands of management learning processes, and the need
14 to design learning experiences that successfully negotiate the tensions between experience, reflection,
15 abstraction and action.

16 An equally important challenge to executive management educators is not simply to promote effec-
17 tive learning processes for the complex, inter-disciplinary challenges of leadership today, but to equip
18 business people with the mental models (Adams, 2004) and individual capabilities to navigate the evol-
19 ing and unpredictable challenges of tomorrow. Here we may draw attention to the particularly pressing
20 and linked issues of global insecurity, poverty and environmental stressors e.g. climate change, which
21 in the future will impact virtually every business in every sector – either because they introduce new
22 risks and liabilities or because they allow new opportunities for innovation and market development. In
23 coming years, navigating complexity in international business will require systemic knowledge of politi-
24 cal, social, economic, technological and ecological drivers of the external environment (Coopey, 2003),
25 and it will require the organization to develop the strategic commitment, culture and dynamic capabil-
26 ities necessary to turn those drivers into competitive advantage (Wheeler, 2004).

30 Educating for Business and Sustainability

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32 The events of 11 September in the US led to a great deal of deep reflection and discussion among
33 academics on the meaning of such an outrage for management education and research (Fukami,
34 2002). Indeed numerous voices have been raised in the past ten years that have drawn attention to the
35 essential unsustainability of both management practice and education that is grounded solely in the
36 uncritical application of traditional approaches to strategic management and organization (Mintzberg
37 and Lampel, 2001; Zohar and Middleton, 1997; Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003). Pfeffer and Fong (2002)
38 are not alone in drawing attention to the fundamental challenge sustainability represents for business
39 schools and their traditional curricula. In direct contrast to traditional strategic management approaches,
40 Shrivastava (1995) and Hart (1995, 1997) have argued that business needs to embrace environmental,
41 social and economic drives if society is to achieve any level of stability in the global commons.

42 Influential commentators such as Elkington (1998) and Hawken and co-workers (1999) have chroni-
43 cled the serious embrace of environmental and social drivers by leading international businesses in
44 recent years. Increasingly, this embrace has not simply been one of reaction to threat and accommoda-
45 tion of new risks. Instead, the emerging agenda has been one of opportunity not liability, new markets
46 ⁶ not old markets, innovation not conservatism (Prahalad and Hart, 2002; Hart and Christensen, 2002).
47 Thus we see such international giants as DuPont and BASF (chemicals), BP and Shell (oil and gas),

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Unilever and Proctor and Gamble (consumer products), HP and IBM (information and communications technologies), Toyota and Honda (automotive) and others adopting explicit stances on socially and environmentally sustainable products and services, and well defined strategies on 'sustainability' as an opportunity for value creation. In this context, sustainability implies balanced and synergistic creation of economic, social and environmental value (Wheeler *et al.*, 2003; Hart and Milstein, 2003).

The challenge of educating for business and sustainability has been addressed in many diverse ways (Egri and Rogers, 2003; Galea, 2004). In particular, it has precipitated the emergence of innovative applications of alternative pedagogies, such as critical pedagogy (Kearins and Springett, 2003; Welsh and Murray, 2003); whole-systems learning approaches (Brown and Macy, 2004); novel experiential teaching approaches and exercises (Bradbury, 2003) and, in a few cases, fundamental curriculum reform in management and business programs (Marshall, 2004; Pesonen, 2003). Collectively, such initiatives have attempted to create successful learning contexts that engage business students in embracing new understandings that promote sustainable business practices.

Despite these promising developments and the clear case to be made for executive management education that addresses the widest possible array of external drivers of business success, there have been relatively few successful transformations at either the MBA or senior executive learning levels (Wheeler *et al.*, 2001). While there is growing evidence of interest in these issues among business students and University-based teachers (World Resources Institute and Aspen Institute, 2003), there are very few established offerings at the senior executive education level (Courtice and Porritt, 2004). This paper describes and critically examines the Sustainable Enterprise Academy as one such institution, explicitly dedicated to senior business leader learning and leadership in the field of business and sustainability. The paper recounts the Academy's journey through five successive Business Leader Seminars between 1999 and 2003. Evaluation data from participants are presented and lessons learned described. The paper also explores future avenues of development for the Academy.

The Sustainable Enterprise Academy – Early Beginnings

In 1999, one of Canada's longest-established 'business and environment' programs, The Erivan K Haub Program at the Schulich School of Business, was re-launched as a 'business and sustainability' program to better reflect the broad interests of its primary audiences and contemporary thinking on the need to integrate responses to social, economic and environmental issues affecting business. Simultaneously, the program was re-organized into three areas: teaching (most of which was conducted at the post-graduate level), research and executive education (Wheeler *et al.*, 2001). The executive education element was placed under the leadership of a former senior executive who had developed the concept of the Sustainable Enterprise Academy during that year.

The Sustainable Enterprise Academy was partly inspired by the success of similar programs in Europe and the US, most notably the Cambridge (UK) University Program for Industry's 'Prince of Wales' seminars and the various conferences and summits of the World Resources Institute. These programs had demonstrated that it was possible to reach out to business leaders with a general interest in sustainable development – particularly in companies where leadership was being shown by CEOs and where the strategic implications of 'triple bottom line' thinking were suspected if not fully understood by senior management teams. However, in developing a business and sustainability offering for a primarily North American audience, it quickly became apparent that the pedagogical and philosophical underpinnings of executive education in this arena needed to be significantly different to what had been developed before for European audiences, or past attempts in the US.

1 The development process for the initial principal offering of the Sustainable Enterprise Academy –
 2 the Business Leader Seminar – was exhaustive. Five corporations¹ committed \$200 000 (CAN) each
 3 over three years to underwrite the process, enabling the deployment of significant academic and prac-
 4 titioner talent. In all, ten ‘core faculty’ were recruited from academic institutions in Canada (four), the
 5 US (two) and Europe (one) supplemented by three practitioner/academics representing civil society and
 6 business perspectives. Over a period of 12 months, these faculty met on several occasions in Canada to
 7 help develop four key elements of the program: a mission for the Academy, a pedagogical philosophy,
 8 an ‘anchor’ model for content for the seminar and a model for learning for the seminar. The first
 9 element, the establishment of a mission for the Academy, was relatively easily accomplished: ‘... to
 10 assist business in the transformation to corporate sustainability by providing senior executives in busi-
 11 ness, government and civil society with the vision, education, tools and support necessary to champion
 12 sustainable development in their organizations’. In this way the Academy made clear its commitment
 13 to tri-sectoral (business, civil society and government) collaboration in service of business transfor-
 14 mation rather than, for example, committing to broader societal objectives as a defined outcome of the
 15 seminars.

16 The pedagogical philosophy emerged through a process of very active debate during the year-long
 17 series of meetings of the initial ‘core’ faculty.² Early on in the process it became clear that the Academy
 18 would, through its business focus, have more content delivered from for-profit business perspectives
 19 than e.g. from civil society or governmental spokespeople. Similarly, the starting point for the discus-
 20 sion of the role of business would not be ‘profits or sustainability?’ but ‘profits *through* sustainability’:
 21 how could business turn social, economic and environmental challenges into drivers for opportunity
 22 and growth – a philosophy more aligned with a pragmatic rather than a moral or ethical case for action
 23 (Drucker, 1982). This philosophy, consistent with the perspectives of Freeman (1984, 2000), Hart (1995,
 24 **8** 1997) and Wheeler and co-authors (1998, 2003), was reinforced by both content and learning processes.
 25 This placed the Academy in a qualitatively different position from other offerings predicated on a criti-
 26 cal deconstruction of the capitalist model. The Academy’s starting point was not to raise a range of global
 27 environmental and social problems and then challenge business with the moral imperative of change.
 28 Rather it was to take those challenges as understood, frame them as drivers and then invite business
 29 executives to process them as opportunities for strategic re-invention and growth.

30 Particularly influential in crystallizing faculty thinking on philosophical stance was a strategy formu-
 31 lation model developed by Hart, reshaped somewhat in discussion and eventually published by Hart
 32 and Milstein (2003). This model – a navigational tool for businesses choosing sustainable strategic
 33 options – encourages businesses to consider their options from internal and external perspectives, both
 34 in the present and in the longer term. The strength of the model from the perspective of business leaders
 35 is that it legitimates shareholder value (or economic value added) as a central objective for the firm,
 36 while characterizing ‘sustainable value added’ as a superior long term construction. This navigational
 37 tool increasingly became the intellectual anchor for the Business Leader Seminar – particularly as the
 38 Academy sought to refine, clarify and simplify the content of its flagship offering. Thus a progression
 39 through the four quadrants of Hart’s 2 × 2 became the consolidating logic for the entire seminar.

40 A key premise informing the development of the program’s pedagogy and design was a commitment
 41 to an experientially based learning approach. A traditional, ‘top-down’ expert driven pedagogy was
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43 ¹The five founding corporate sponsors of the Sustainable Enterprise Academy were AMEC (UK/Canada), Dofasco (Canada), DuPont Canada,
 44 PetroCanada and Suncor Energy (Canada). Other non-financial sponsors included the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (formerly the
 45 Business Council on National Issues), the International Institute for Sustainable Development, the Canadian National Round Table on the
 46 Environment and the Economy, the World Business Council on Sustainable Development and the World Resources Institute.

47 ²The original ‘core’ faculty were David Bell, Pat Delbridge, John Ehrenfeld, Chris Galea, Art Hanson, Stuart Hart, Brian Kelly, Jim Leslie, Nigel
 Rooome and David Wheeler.

rejected in favor of maximizing opportunities for learning through experience. Experiential learning is a model of how people learn from their lived experience (Kolb, 1984; Johnson and Johnson, 1997). Kolb defines experiential learning as an iterative, cyclical process, 'whereby knowledge is created by the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's idea of 'concrete experience' refers to what we experience directly through personal experience, not vicariously through the accounts of others, such as 'expert' academics or practitioners. Thus, Kolb's experiential learning model represents adult learning as a cyclical, iterative process, involving four generic stages that explain the process of translating experience through reflection and observation into abstract concepts, which then guide active experimentation through new experiences. This cycle is typically repeated several times in what can be described as a spiraling pattern of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Zuber-Skeritt, 1992).

While the learning model for the seminar was developed over time, strong reliance was also placed on the approaches of Argyris (1990) and Argyris and Schön (1996), which stress the importance of experiential learning, systems thinking, visioning and organizational learning in effective change processes (Sweet *et al.*, 2003; Sanders *et al.*, 2004). The inclusion of a systems approach as both a discipline of thinking and a method for generating successful action plans was adopted by core faculty at the initial stages of the design process. It was recognized that the most important task of the participants was to meaningfully integrate learnings into their respective organizational settings. Given the current state of unsustainable business practice, seminar participants were expected to experience what Schön (1983, 1987) has termed an indeterminate zone of practice – an unpredictable, ambiguous, unstable and conflictual reality.

Thus participants were introduced to a systems thinking or 'learning organization' approach (Senge *et al.*, 1994, 1997) as both a conceptual framework for integrating seminar content and a powerful tool for developing practical action strategies. Throughout the seminars, systems thinking models were presented as a way of successfully building the necessary bridges between seminar content and the realities of participants' respective work settings. The *discipline* of systems thinking offered them a powerful way of seeing the relatedness of the dynamic, and often paradoxical, dimensions of sustainable development (Bradbury, 2003). At the same time, the *practice* of systems thinking offered specific, practical methods and techniques for translating new understandings to high leverage actions (Senge *et al.*, 1997).

Finally, three types of learning environment were created within the 4 day seminar: (i) plenary contributions with questions from the floor; (ii) interactive workshop presentations offering participants more in-depth and applied learning opportunities and (iii) learning team sessions, where small facilitated groups of five to seven participants could share their own stories and coach one another privately to new understandings. This three-way split between plenary, workshop and learning team formats was consolidated over time, with minor modifications in the time occupied by each over the period of the seminar. Considerable thought was also devoted to empowering participants to translate seminar learnings to what could be done in their own organizations. Different techniques were tried in this regard, including Open Space (Owen, 1995), 'communities of action' (Senge *et al.*, 1994), personal action planning and practitioner panels discussing live examples of successfully implemented sustainability strategies. These learning formats grounded the program pedagogy in an experientially based approach that maintained an explicit tension between abstract concepts and concrete experience on the one hand, and an active–reflective tension on the other hand (Boyatzis *et al.*, 1995).

Evolution of Faculty Process

The majority of the ten original 'core faculty' remained directly involved in delivering the program up to the third seminar in Banff, Alberta, in May 2002. At this event, many participants expressed the need

1 for fewer expert-driven information-centred sessions, and more time for reflection and processing. Con-
 2 sequently, in the November 2002 event at UNC Chapel Hill, there was significant streamlining of faculty
 3 numbers and roles, and the addition of practitioner learning team coaches. By the fifth seminar in May
 4 2003, only three of the original faculty had significant roles in delivery and two played 'visiting roles' in
 5 plenary and workshops. This process illustrated the vital importance of a reflective stance by the project
 6 leaders as well as the dynamic nature of program design, with participant feedback and needs – rather
 7 than expert faculty and their interests – driving changes. Over time, project leadership for each seminar
 8 was streamlined to comprise the lead organizer for the collaborating institution, the Director of the
 9 Academy, the lead person on learning process and two or three members of the original faculty. This
 10 proved both more efficient and more replicable, a point to which we return later in the paper. We now
 11 explore how some of the design changes played through in the first five seminars.

14 Evolution of Seminar Design

16 The design of the Sustainable Enterprise Academy Business Leader Seminar changed in several impor-
 17 tant ways between the first and fifth events. The design continued to evolve somewhat for subsequent
 18 events held in Vancouver in October 2003 and Toronto in May and November 2004, but the format is
 19 now largely established. We distinguish between two main phases in the development of the seminar
 20 itself. The first phase (comprising the first three events) was about experimentation; the second phase
 21 (seminars 4 and 5 and subsequent events) involves ongoing streamlining and focus.

22 The most important changes between the first and more recent seminars were (a) reduced reliance
 23 on internationally recognized speakers for plenary and workshop presentations, (b) reduced reliance on
 24 academic contributions to plenaries, workshops and learning teams, (c) increased reliance on business
 25 practitioner speakers, workshop hosts and learning team facilitators, (d) reduction in formal program
 26 length from 4 to 3.5 days and (e) lessening intensity of content exposure (including content associated
 27 with learning model). The most important retained features include (a) discipline of business focus, (b)
 28 inclusion and constant updating of international leading edge practice, (c) clarity of anchor model (Hart
 29 and Milstein, 2003) and subsidiary content models, (d) an experientially based, systems thinking peda-
 30 gogy committed to engaging learners through multiple learning processes – action, cognition, reflec-
 31 tion and experience (Kolb, 1984), (e) addressing multiple learning styles in both program design and
 32 instructional approach, (f) dynamic integration of content with learning model and (g) responsiveness
 33 to active real-time feedback from participants.

34 The reasoning for some of the changes may be worth exploring further, starting with the reduced
 35 reliance on internationally renowned speakers and academic content providers. Both of these phenom-
 36 ena may be associated with the increasing confidence of the Academy in its product and its reputation.
 37 In addition to its ten 'core faculty', the first seminar listed eight keynote speakers including three CEOs
 38 and internationally renowned speakers such as John Elkington, who coined the concept of the triple
 39 bottom line (Elkington, 1998), and Amory Lovins, co-inventor of the concept of 'natural capitalism'
 40 (Hawken *et al.*, 1999).

41 In contrast, the fourth seminar at UNC (which exemplified the shift to streamlining and focus) fielded
 42 no CEO speakers. The faculty comprised four academics, four practitioners and two learning process
 43 facilitators. Guest speakers included two well known business practitioners, and three civil society com-
 44 mentators. More recent seminars have re-instated prominent names as key speakers, but not at the level
 45 of the first three events. They have also continued the emphasis on business practitioner involvement
 46 in plenaries, workshops and learning team facilitation. The combined impact of these changes was
 47 entirely positive. Evaluations in earlier seminars showed that no general premium applied to academic

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or big name speakers, although it was clear that for some participants contributions by authoritative speakers remained a highlight. In contrast, evaluations suggest that involving business practitioners is frequently deemed a key success factor for the seminar for a significant majority of participants.

The reduction in the formal program from 4 to 3.5 days also merits some explanation. The Academy has tried to balance participants' desire for maximum stimulation and the need for immersion in a transformative experience over several days with the exigencies of their working lives. Happily, the Academy has experienced relatively few early departures because of pressing business requirements, but feedback from some of the Academy's most senior attendees led to the decision to shorten the seminar by one half day, again demonstrating the co-driven nature of design with participants. We will now turn to a more in-depth discussion of how participants have responded to the program through attendance and evaluation.

Attendance and Evaluation

Between fall 2000 and spring 2003, the Sustainable Enterprise Academy Business Leader events attracted 188 participants, spread across five events in eastern and western Canada and the US. Of these about 70% were business people, and approximately 15% came from government, 10% from civil society organizations and 4% from academia, with a target audience of 35–40 participants. Overall, as judged by market response, the seminars have been successful on a regular basis with an average of 38 attendees per event over the first five events. As described above, participant evaluations have played a very important part in the assessment of the level of success of the events both during and after the events themselves. Daily and post-event evaluation instruments were developed over the course of the first two seminars, and were undertaken on a per event basis. Evaluations are submitted with the participant's Learning Team group, in order that faculty can track whether individual team processes are working effectively.

Typically, daily evaluations are gathered and discussed by the faculty each evening, occasionally leading to minor program changes on the following day. The final seminar evaluation is administered just before participants depart the venue, with 23 questions (some sub-divided) addressing all aspects of the experience, including whether the participant has been provided with sufficient understanding, tools and personal momentum to effect change in their organizations.

The First Experiment

Happily, results from the first seminar were very positive. By this stage, the project had received promises of \$1 million (CAN) in funding, and significant investments had been made in product development, speaker engagement, seminar costs and participant recruitment. However, nothing quite like the Academy business leader seminar had been undertaken in North America, and there were significant reputational and financial risks involved. Final evaluations were completed by 75% of participants. In rating the seminar overall, participants split 43% 'excellent', 43% 'very good', 13% 'good' and zero 'poor'. Ninety percent of participants gave an unequivocal 'yes' to the question 'do you believe that participation in the seminar has changed the way in which you might operate – personally or professionally/corporately – in the future?'. Fifty percent of respondents 'strongly agreed' that the seminar 'increased the likelihood that your organization will take strategic actions in the area of sustainable development', with just over one-third somewhat agreeing. Very similar statistics emerged in response to the

1 question 'has this seminar increased the likelihood that your business or area of responsibility will take
2 strategic actions in the area of sustainable development?'

3 The more personal question 'do you feel equipped to become a sustainability leader?' evoked strong
4 agreement from 23% of respondents, some agreement from seven out of 10, and disagreement from
5 just one participant (3%). Answers to this question may have raised broader contextual and personal
6 factors as well as seminar-related evaluations for participants, but nevertheless the data provided an
7 interesting perspective on the state of confidence of seminar attendees leaving the event. On a similarly
8 optimistic note, one in three strongly agreed with the question 'in your judgment will your actions
9 lead to change in your organization?' (two-thirds somewhat agreed, zero were neutral and zero in
10 disagreement).

11 Notwithstanding these positive results for the first seminar and its impact on participants, there was
12 mixed feedback on the balance between learning formats. Two-thirds expressed unequivocal agreement
13 that there was a successful balance, but two (out of 30) participants disagreed and 30% were more equivo-
14 cal. There were a number of comments requesting more time for discussion, especially in learning team
15 formats. In addition, there were mixed comments about value of some of the workshops, and several
16 comments were made about the intensity and length of the agenda.

19 The Proof of Concepts: Seminars 2–5

21 The full seminar evaluation instrument was changed somewhat for the second seminar to refine certain
22 questions and to better provide quantitative data for evaluation purposes. For example, from the second
23 seminar the 'general approval' evaluation was split into two 'barometer' questions. The first question
24 related to the objective of the seminar from the perspective of the Academy: 'The overall program objec-
25 tive of the SEA Business Leader Seminar is to encourage participants to take a leadership role in the
26 development of strategies that will support triple bottom line. Please rate the degree to which the seminar
27 successfully realized this objective'. A second question participants to 'rate the seminar overall' as 'poor',
28 'fair', 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent', thus providing some comparability with a similar question in the
29 first evaluation. The percentage results for these questions, converted into Likert scales and expressed
30 as means for seminars 2–5, are listed in Table 1.

31 The two barometer questions produced highly consistent results, showing that participants' ratings
32 of the event closely mirrored their perceptions of whether the Academy was also meeting its objectives
33 through the seminar. They also demonstrated how positive overall ratings have consolidated with the
34 more 'streamlined and focused' design that was adopted after the third seminar.³ While care has to be
35 observed in this comparison across all events due to slight changes in the response options, neverthe-
36 less we may observe that general approval of the seminar started very high, dipping slightly in the second
37 and third seminars, but more than recovered in the fourth and fifth events.

38 In terms of important 'output' measures of the seminar, it is interesting to note participants' per-
39 spectives on whether they have been better equipped to lead and mobilize change in their own organi-
40 zations as a result of seminar experience. Responses to some of these questions are summarized in
41 Table 2, with results converted into a Likert scale mean in each case.

42 It is interesting to note that for the two questions posed throughout all seminars, there is generally
43 increasing satisfaction on both understanding the business case and strengthening of personal com-
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45 ³In the first seminar, participants were asked to rank the overall seminar in four (rather than five) categories: excellent, very good, good or
46 poor (i.e. there was no 'fair' category). If we apply scores of 5, 4, 3 and 1 to these judgments in order to mirror the Likert scale in the new for-
47 mulation of the question, an average score of 4.3 emerges for the first seminar.

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| | Seminar 2 (May 2001) | Seminar 3 (May 2002) | Seminar 4 (Nov 2002) | Seminar 5 (May 2003) |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Participants' perspective that seminar 'successfully realized [Academy] objective to encourage participants to take a leadership role' | | | | |
| Very high (%) | 27.6 | 12.9 | 52.4 | 48.1 |
| High (%) | 51.7 | 61.3 | 42.8 | 44.4 |
| Moderate (%) | 13.8 | 25.8 | 4.8 | 7.4 |
| Minimal (%) | 6.9 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Not at all (%) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Likert scale 1–5 (mean) where 1 = not at all; 5 = very high | 4.0 | 3.9 | 4.5 | 4.4 |
| Range | 2–5 | 3–5 | 3–5 | 3–5 |
| <i>n</i> (response rate) | 29 (76%) | 34 (79%) | 21 (64%) | 27 (77%) |
| Participants' direct rating of 'seminar overall' | | | | |
| Excellent (%) | 27.6 | 12.9 | 61.9 | 60.7 |
| Very good (%) | 48.3 | 56.5 | 33.3 | 28.6 |
| Good (%) | 20.7 | 19.4 | 4.8 | 7.1 |
| Fair (%) | 3.4 | 11.3 | 0 | 3.6 |
| Poor (%) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Likert scale 1–5 (mean) where 1 = poor; 5 = excellent | 4.0 | 3.6 | 4.6 | 4.5 |
| Range | 2–5 | 2–5 | 3–5 | 2–5 |
| <i>n</i> (response rate) | 29 (76%) | 34 (79%) | 21 (64%) | 28 (80%) |

Table 1. General satisfaction ratings for the Sustainable Enterprise Academy Business Leader Seminars, 2001–2003

mitment to a sustainable business strategy, with peaks associated with the US seminar at UNC Chapel Hill in November 2002. These data do not, of course, demonstrate that more effective action was indeed taken by the participants. This aspect will be the basis of a future study. Here it is sufficient to note that participants left with a heightened sense of personal capability and likely organizational responsiveness.

Another key question for the faculty and the sponsors of the Academy is the degree to which the Business Leader event is able to provide both conceptual and practical tools for integrating sustainability in business strategy formulation and implementation. Here the definitions become somewhat problematic. It is certainly not the purpose of the business leader seminars to equip participants with the detail of implementing 'practical' tools such as environmental management systems, life cycle assessment, emissions trading and so on. While the Academy takes a strategic approach, it also aims to provide myriad examples of the practical enactment of sustainability strategies through the provision of real cases presented for the most part by business practitioners. Thus, the faculty provides the road maps and the conceptual framing for these cases to be understood and processed in plenaries, workshops or learning teams. It is, however, up to individual participants to derive their own practical understanding of what has been shared and learned (Kolb, 1984). Depending on the context of the organization in question, a conceptual tool can be very 'practical' if it allows the formulation of better strategy. Conversely learning about a 'practical tool' can be entirely academic for a business where its application has no value.

Nonetheless, despite these definitional ambiguities, the Academy has been assiduous in collecting data on how the participants saw the provision of 'take-aways' from the seminar both conceptually and practically. Responses to the two key questions are summarized in Table 3, with results converted into a five-point Likert scale mean.

| | Seminar 2 (May 2001) | Seminar 3 (May 2002) | Seminar 4 (Nov 2002) | Seminar 5 (May 2003) |
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Table 2. Participant perceptions of personal capabilities and likely organizational responsiveness as a result of attendance at the Business Leader Seminar

| | Seminar 2 (May 2001) | Seminar 3 (May 2002) | Seminar 4 (Nov 2002) | Seminar 5 (May 2003) |
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Table 3. Participant perceptions on provision of conceptual and practical tools for enabling organizational change towards sustainability

These data show that in general participants have been very satisfied with the provision of conceptual tools, with scores increasing between the third and fourth seminars. The data also demonstrate that there has been a significant split between participants' perceived benefits from the seminars in terms of conceptual versus 'practical' tools. However, it is interesting to note that the gap appeared to narrow somewhat between the high intensity seminars (2 and 3) versus the more streamlined or focused seminars (4 and 5) – despite the fact that less formal content was provided in the later events. This result

| | Seminar 2 (May 2001) | Seminar 3 (May 2002) | Seminar 4 (Nov 2002) | Seminar 5 (May 2003) |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Learning team sessions 1 = poor; 5 = excellent | 3.7 | 3.6 | 3.8 | 4.7 |
| Plenary sessions 1 = poor; 5 = excellent | 3.7 | 3.6 | 4.3 | 3.9 |
| Concurrent workshops 1 = poor; 5 = excellent | 3.4 | 3.5 | 4.0 | 3.7 |
| Informal time 1 = poor; 5 = excellent | 3.4 | 3.2 | 4.0 | 4.2 |

Table 4. Participant perceptions of different learning formats in the Business Leader Seminar

suggests some evidence for the hypothesis that it is not so much what is *conveyed* – especially in plenary and workshop sessions – as what is *processed* that allows participants to bridge from the conceptual models provided to the practical implications for them and their organizations.

The final piece of analysis to be presented here relates to the question of balance and appreciation between different learning formats: plenaries, workshops, learning teams and informal networking time (meals, breaks, post-session networking etc). In Table 4, we present data on the perceptions of participants on each of these formats expressed as a five-point Likert scale mean.

What seems to emerge from these data is a reasonably balanced picture of complementary learning opportunities appreciated to varying degrees by different participants. Experiences of learning are highly dependent on personal learning styles and preferences, and the variability in responses to each learning format reflected this (Sweet *et al.*, 2003). Typically participants ranged across 2–5 (i.e. fair to excellent) for all formats for all events, although happily there were no instances of a ‘poor’ ranking for any single format by any individual participant. As noted earlier, the formats are designed to be complementary as well as to accommodate different learning styles; so in an ideal world all would be averaging very good to excellent. Some marked variability, however, has occurred from session to session: for example, in Learning Team sessions (which jumped from an average of 3.7 in seminars 2–4 to a score of 4.7 in seminar 5), and informal time (which varied from 3.2 to 4.2 between seminars 3 and 5). We may explain the first observation in part by the introduction of sacrosanct Learning Team time (albeit in fewer sessions), and perhaps the effect of highly effective facilitators in the fifth event. The second observation almost certainly relates to the aforementioned program intensity of the third event compared with the relatively less rushed informal time provided in seminars 4 and 5.

Conclusions

Overall, these findings suggest that the Sustainable Enterprise Academy approach is a successful learning experience for the overwhelming majority of participants. The combination of plenary, workshop and learning team approaches offers participants different points of entry for engaging the strategic models and navigational tools for sustainable business leadership. Instead of narrowing the array of learning experiences through a more streamlined program, a greater variety of learning experiences appears justified.

From a design perspective, the success of these multiple learning opportunities can be understood as an example of experiential and systems-thinking based learning pedagogy (Kolb, 1995; Senge, 1997).

1 The design reflects the need for learner understanding at both behavioral and conceptual levels, as well
 2 as the need to structure opportunities for individualized practice, direct feedback and the enactment of
 3 new skill sets in order to integrate them into existing patterns of thinking and action (Hunsaker and
 4 Dilamarter, 2004).

5 **13** Hogan and Warrenfeldtz (2003) argue that learning outcomes fall into two broad categories: they
 6 assert that people learn skills ('knowing how') and they learn ways of conceptualizing reality ('knowing
 7 that'). They also express the view, in the context of executive education, that 'everyone's performance
 8 can be improved, but it can only be improved by focusing on poor skills and mental errors'. We dis-
 9 agree with this assessment in so far as it implies that executive learning is about correction rather than
 10 development. However, we do agree that successful interventions are likely to require a combination of
 11 conceptual (or cognitive) and practical learnings. In this paper we have provided some evidence that in
 12 the context of introducing a novel paradigmatic concept (*viz.* sustainability) the balance between theo-
 13 retical and practical outcomes is a delicate one for senior executive participants, but that allowing suffi-
 14 cient time for reflection may be one way to ensure an optimal balance, at least in the perception of
 15 participants. Successful learning lies in the negotiation of multiple learning demands in a way that gen-
 16 erates synergy from the different dimensions of the learning process. Emphasizing one or several dimen-
 17 sions of this process at the expense of others will likely compromise the success of the entire learning
 18 enterprise.

19 The Sustainable Enterprise Academy is best described as a work-in-progress that has undergone sig-
 20 nificant development through its brief history. Perhaps its greatest success to date is reflected in its
 21 ability to embrace its own teachings about the need for flexibility and change in meeting its own oppor-
 22 tunities and challenges. In order to continue to deliver high level programs in leadership development
 23 and organizational learning for sustainability, the Academy needs to continue to engage in critical reflec-
 24 tion on its own mental models and guiding practices. To date, direct and candid feedback from partic-
 25 ipants has served to provoke faculty to draw valuable lessons from both successful and unsuccessful
 26 aspects of the program. It has been able to continuously refine and re-align its pedagogy and content to
 27 date, offering more flexible content and learning process that better facilitate new understandings and
 28 actions for its participants. In order to ensure its own sustainability, the Sustainable Enterprise Academy
 29 needs to seek out new drivers and opportunities for better meeting the needs of its learners. Its devel-
 30 oping partnerships with like-minded academic institutions in different cultural settings may represent
 31 the next significant source of provocation to develop a deeper understanding of how to better assist busi-
 32 ness leaders around the world in the transformation to corporate sustainability.

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