

“They Would Say That:” The Treatment of Agenda-Driven Sources on Business Degree Programmes

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Abstract

This article discusses the use of literature from agenda-driven sources, such as policy authorities and lobby groups, in business education. Notwithstanding issues around objectivity and peer review, this piece advocates the inclusion of such literature and recommends methods for doing so constructively. The methods recommended include attention to facts/argument distinctions, pursuit of balance alongside quality media, exploring methodology aspects of subjectivity and direct engagement of policy and lobby topics. Following this there is explanation of how these methods are deployed throughout a business degree course in practice. Finally, there is reflection on these aspects in the context of relevant pedagogy.

Introduction

While impartiality and a degree of academic rigour, through a peer review editorial process, are desirable for the bulk of literature used by students in business studies – it is very evident that there exists much writing in this field from sources with an agenda. This is especially so in business environment studies because of the political aspect and because commercial interests are involved.

For the analysis here, agenda driven literature can be taken to mean writings in which one can expect a pre-conceived or intended message to exist ahead of engagement with the issues at hand.

This piece examines the merits and issues regarding this literature – as well as ways to navigate and use it effectively. Key themes guiding the approach to the examination here include reference to relevant comments in business research methods literature, stipulations from regulatory and quality bodies on business education, applicable aspects of teaching and learning theory, plus experience at the author’s own business school.

First it is necessary to clarify the types of literature explored here within the broad category ‘agenda-driven.’

Since Bryman and Bell's (2011) suggested first question for reflection, on literature to be considered for business research, focuses on who the author is – in an organisational sense – then it is perhaps best here to clarify these types of literature with regard to source.

Relevant Types/Sources of Agenda-Driven Literature

It should be noted that these sources are sometimes addressed in rankings of reliability and disposability in business management research methods texts, e.g. Quinton and Smallbone (2006) and Collis and Hussey (2009) respectively, in particular in sections regarding treatment of material from the internet.

Policy Authorities' Literature.

Here we are talking about literature from national government, such as the Treasury, and supranational government bodies, e.g. the European Union, EU. Those bodies that are active in policy making in an ongoing way are also either highly politicized or at least have politicized views held about them. The key elements to note are that on the one hand, these bodies may be important for accessing detailed and especially aggregated information, but also that those authorities which are active in policy will always have an agenda to say that the policy is well founded, is going well in implementation and that it is having/will have beneficial effects.

While the policy authorities' literature is likely to have an agenda in terms of promoting and defending steps which they take in areas of the business environment over which they have power or control, it is also necessary also to consider sources of literature where one expects an agenda to exist in terms of efforts to exert and direct influence upon the policy steps taken in the business environment.

Pressure/Interest Groups' Literature.

Here we are talking about groups and associations that seek to represent business either in general, or an aspect or subdivision/sector of business. Well known examples include the Confederation of British Industry, CBI, and the US Chamber of Commerce, USCC. The varied scope of business lobby groups; geographically from local to national and international, and sectorally, from industry specific to economy wide, is effectively covered by Worthington and Britton (2006). There is somewhat of a grey area or continuum from interest groups with ongoing lobby activity, and professional associations encompassing either a sector, or a particular role in business, e.g. the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, CIPD, and the Society for Human Resource Management, SHRM. These associations may act in part similarly to academic/vocational awarding institutions in that they validate their own professional qualifications which may be an additional gateway to progression in that career management field.

The lobby active business interest groups will produce output in terms of press releases and other media communications – as well as findings from surveys of their own membership. The professional associations tend to produce periodical journals/professional magazines for their membership, e.g. Management Today.

In the case of the business lobby groups, they are obliged to progress the interests of their members and so one expects them to argue the significance of their businesses to the economy, oppose policies obstructive to their businesses, and also heighten the imperative of policies which support their businesses and improve their environment. In the case of the

professional associations, while politicized lobby activity may be infrequent, one should expect the arguments and analyses in their literature to be seen chiefly from the perspective of the profession to which they relate.

In his study on critical writing for business management students, Mingers (2000) puts forward the critique of objectivity as a key ingredient, alongside his other themes of critique, namely of rhetoric, tradition and authority. This is certainly an applicable critique with regard to agenda driven literature and sources. It is argued here that this should be applied not as a criterion for discounting particular sources of literature, but as guidance on how to approach them critically, with their inclusion often being vital in business studies for the following specific reasons.

Value of Having/Using Them

Inside/Up-to-Date View.

There is inevitably a tendency for trade-off between the gaining of inside, or close to the action information and the retention of impartiality and academic rigour of sources.

As regards topicality, while theories and empirical studies take time to disseminate, the applied elements of the business environment are very fast moving in terms of events and their impact, e.g. when financial crashes or sectoral shocks take place. The scope for books and academic journals (even online) to give prompt analysis to these aspects is limited.

The types of organisations mentioned above will produce quick responses to relevant developments – and while those responses will be from a particular perspective – they are also likely to contain information and lines of argument that warrant analysis. In essence, while the speed and closeness to action, of the reporting and analysis, is likely to bring trade-off against impartiality, the trade-off, it is argued here, will not apply to depth of knowledge and understanding, and this is reasoned in the following.

Expertise.

Literature from these sources may often be created by people whose topic expertise is comparable to those business academics who publish books and journal articles. In terms of authorities' literature sources there is the involvement of civil servants with considerable departmental experience and capability. In the case of business interest groups, the people appointed to write their communications are likely to have sizeable sector experience – either as a participant or an analyst – meaning that as well as factual evidence, sophisticated reasoning on the impact of policies and environment developments on the sector concerned is going to be present.

Perspectives Wanted.

It may be an essential ingredient, in teaching, learning and assessment, that multiple perspectives on an issue are present. These may be perspectives from those directly involved or affected and albeit with an agenda, policy authorities and business pressure groups literature may be important elements here.

A reasonable topic example would be a piece of workplace legislation. In such a case policy authorities' publications as well as relevant business group literature on how the legislation is or would impact may be important parts of a critical and balanced piece.

Looking at all the above points, it is fair to say that literature from these agenda driven sources is key to understanding the external business environment, and further, the ways in which business interacts with and seeks to shape that environment. From a regulatory, quality and standards point of view, this literature is important for business programmes to be effective in addressing at least two essential knowledge areas as set down for accreditation by the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business), namely the economic and political contexts of organisations, and group and individual behaviours in organisations and society, AACSB International (2013). With regard to quality/regulatory bodies with a more prescriptive approach to degree course content, the UK Quality Assurance Agency benchmarks for business management at masters level includes elements relevant to agenda driven sources, in terms of specifying a requirement for conceptual understanding that enables students to evaluate the rigour and validity of published research and assess its relevance to new situations (QAA, 2007). It is argued here that alongside the conceptual, practical guidance for business students in engaging and navigating agenda driven literature is important; both are addressed in the following.

Approaches

Facts vs. Opinion Distinction.

This is perhaps the most straightforward distinguishing approach for guiding students, and a key part of the advice provided by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012). Under this approach, guidance to students takes a form whereby the expertise and inside view of policy authorities and respected interest groups allows the use of factual evidence sourced to them in student work – but their agenda driven character means that one must place a serious qualification on the use and reliance on opinion from their literature.

A particularly good example where this works is in European Business, for instance regarding achievement of single market integration across the European Union. While one might expect EU sources always to argue that progress is substantial, their factual data, e.g. the internal market scoreboard (see European Commission 2014) – identifying specific measures which have/ have not been implemented by member states, is a highly valuable source.

A focus on the factual evidence from these sources would be consistent with taking a positivist research philosophy into investigation of secondary data, since positivism, as depicted by Collis and Hussey (2009), involves a focus on evidence which is factual and objective. It should be noted however, that a potential difficulty remains in that agenda driven sources are likely to present a selective deployment of facts to suit their intended message. Watchfulness for arguments concluded from selected instances is part of the advice given by Fisher (2004) to business dissertation students undertaking literature analysis.

Balance – Multi-Sides and Quality Media.

Consistent with the mentioned likely desire for a range of perspectives, viewpoints as well as factual data from the above bodies are often important aspects of a piece of business work. In these circumstances, a key element is balance in terms of gaining viewpoints from a variety of agenda-driven bodies involved in an issue. Collis and Hussey (2009) provide linguistic and style guidance on how to cover and present, as well as reference, arguments from such sources when conducting discussion in literature analyses and business research pieces. Also significant for a balanced discussion, acknowledging the required topicality

aspect, is reference to pieces from the quality media regarding the issue concerned, e.g. broadsheets and reputable broadcaster websites. While none of these may be absolutely impartial, deployment of such literature alongside that from agenda-driven bodies should help ensure good coverage and treatment of relevant opinion and factual evidence.

Methodology Incorporation.

Very much in line with the point made above, there may be nothing wrong with having the explicit aim of gaining agenda driven and subjective points of view in a piece of student work. This is especially the case regarding independent project work where the student can set his/her own objectives to some extent.

An example would include a student in dissertation work researching a comparison between business views and general public views on UK entry to the Eurozone. The primary evidence, e.g. from questionnaires, would itself be subjective – and viewpoints from business groups such as those mentioned earlier would represent key literature or secondary evidence components within such a study. In higher education business research work, concept terms such as interpretivism can explicitly state that the methodology of a study is about engaging evidence that is subjective and dependent on viewpoint and/or circumstances - see Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012). Such agenda driven literature – with source kept in mind – can therefore be a valuable component of a bigger picture.

Direct Engagement as a Topic Early On.

One way to help students make their own informed choices about agenda-driven literature is to explore directly the workings of organisations such as business pressure groups early on in their programme. This can be achieved on any Business Environment type of module. Distinctions between pressure groups on Cause/Interest lines can be made with examples like Greenpeace in the former and the business groups, as well as professional associations falling into the interest group category wherein commonality of occupational characteristics is the defining feature, see Kavanagh, Richards, Smith and Geddes (2006). Within business interest groups differences of breadth of coverage can be considered ranging from sector specific trade associations to economy wide umbrella groups with the power/unity trade-off an important aspect here.

Lobbying activity can be depicted as an exchange relationship where policy influence is linked to what pressure groups can offer to government, including in terms of key information and advice. One notes the likely stronger influence gained by umbrella business groups here, whose internal survey findings constitute vital macroeconomic information for governments.

These Approaches in Practice

Looking at the University of Hull validated BA Business Management degree at University Centre Grimsby, UK, direct engagement is achieved early on at level 4/ freshman year within the two semester module Economics and Politics for Business. All of the direct engagement aspects stated above are achieved in the first semester which has a stronger political orientation than the core business economics focus of semester 2. The issues are a major factor in the semester 1 presentation assessment which in 2012-13 required students to discuss how a) ideologies and b) pressure groups can influence business relevant government policy in the UK.

On the pressure groups front, conceptual aspects required references from relevant political and business environment texts, while the evidence aspects chiefly required quality media sources both of group calls for policy actions as well as of policy developments in actuality.

The presentation mode of assessment is effective on this task because of the scope in both the ideology and pressure groups phases for visual mapping of arguable cause and effect links. Similarly, the graphical element is useful for depicting the differing political bodies focussed on by lobbyists across different constitutional systems, e.g. the contrasting executive-legislature aspects between the USA (separation) and the UK (fusion).

The perspective balance and methodology incorporation is especially present in the Research Skills module of level 5/ sophomore year, which requires the students to submit a business related research proposal. Alongside research philosophical coverage there is also proposal oriented literature review which, in addition to discussion, requires reasoned stipulation of literature areas and forms to be explored – and these areas often include sector magazines and business group quality press releases as well as academic journals. As indicated above, these aspects can carry through into the dissertation work of level 6/ final year – which is optional and often based around the research proposal piece from level 5.

Though in some ways the most straightforward approach, the facts vs opinion distinction for government and group literature is pervasively and carefully applied in the higher level policy environment modules of the programme such as European Business, Contemporary Management Issues and Public Sector Management, which exist as options on level 6.

In particular it is felt that the early direct engagement of agenda driven literature in the programme enables richer and more mature exploration and treatment of information at the higher level modules.

Pedagogic Issues Reflection

The main pedagogic sense of gain from the engagement of agenda driven sources really links to the notion of contextualisation, especially regarding sources and motives. In the Kolb (1984) experiential learning model, contextualisation greatly strengthens reflective observation on the meaning of evidence and information gathered. As indicated already, contextualisation and appreciation of context can be seen as enabling of better progress through several levels in the Bloom (1956) cognitive domain taxonomy, from identification and explanation of cause, to critical evaluation of argument and action. It is also tentatively argued here that, across the broad field of social science and humanities, in which business studies sits, contextualisation can be seen as a threshold concept in the criteria model of Meyer and Land (2003, 2005). Contextualisation brings a transformative and irreversible sense making capacity to the engagement of much information in the subject area as well as a pervasive linking quality in line with the integrative criterion. Learning to look at information in a contextualised way may also be a troublesome or counterintuitive process especially for the student of traditional undergraduate age and experience. Across social science and humanities studies contextualisation may also possess the boundary setting criterion in that it intrinsically applies to the subjectivity associated with material in these fields in contrast to the natural sciences.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Agenda driven material is an inevitable and significant component of business studies literature as a whole. Provided specific guidance for treatment is given, the merits of engaging such material far outweigh the negatives. While sections dedicated to the treatment of agenda driven material are seldom present in published business research methods texts or literature review guidance resources, it is argued here that business school faculty can themselves compose such resources, embedding numerous references to the established guidance works therein. It is also strongly advocated that a politics of business element be present in the first year of undergraduate study so that students can familiarise themselves with the kind of material involved, in context of source and motive. Familiarity with the agenda driven sources also has value because the policy authorities and business representation groups are important business graduate employers.

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