MGP 405: A History of Business

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Quarter: Winter 2012
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Required Readings (All links go to the Amazon Kindle editions)

A Short History of Progress, by Ronald Wright
The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals, by Michael Pollan
Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things, by William P. McDonough and Michael Braungart
OR Reinventing Fire: Bold Business Solutions for the New Energy Era by Amory Lovins

The books are widely available new and used, in paper and are available for the Kindle.

I recommend reading the books before the class starts and reviewing them during the weeks they are discussed. They are great books to read over holiday breaks.

Course Goals

Business history – the examination of historical trends that might influence contemporary business – was once a mainstay of business curricula. Students studied the rise of industries and earlier industry leaders trying to understand the social, political, and psychological forces that lead to success, and sometimes to failure. History classes are no longer central to MBA curricula and some argue that the recent collapse of our financial system might have been averted if business leaders had a better sense of history (e.g. housing prices do not always go up as the real estate booms and busts of the 1760s and 1920s demonstrated).

In this class we will read books that in different ways try to place current concerns about sustainable business practices in a larger context. A Short History of Progress is a concise review of the development of civilizations over millennia. The author argues that cultures repeatedly succeed with practices that borrow from the future and that are ultimately unsustainable leading to collapse. The Omnivore’s Dilemma is a personal and institutional journey through the industrial agriculture industry that dominates the production of food in the U.S. The author examines alternatives but does not come to a neat conclusion about how to feed our population in a way that is affordable while being sustainable. The last two books – and you may choose to read only one – suggest ways to do business sustainably. Cradle to Cradle -written by an architect and a chemist - argues that sustainable manufacture requires that we take lessons from nature – that rather than tame the natural environment we adopt practices that mimic natural processes, for example designing products for disassembly and reuse (i.e. planned composting). Working with natural processes, not defying them, is their answer to sustainable business. Reinventing Fire argues for a way to move toward a clean energy future.
The first three books were all best sellers and are very readable. The last is new and by the much-read and respected head of the Rocky Mountain Institute. They are “big idea” books that are accessible to non-specialists. Although they each take on a separate topic we will explore the linkages that might exist between them, examine them critically, and see what might be useful for those in business careers.

Structure of the Class and Summary of Assignments

This class will meet together at least twice. Most weeks we will utilize the online course tools of SmartSite to discuss the readings. The class will take place over 2 weeks. Students will be expected to read the assigned materials, respond online to writing prompts that I will post, and to comment on materials posted by other students. Students will be expected to come to our two in-class meetings. I look forward to lively and informed reactions to the reading and to each others’ posts. I fully hope that we will become a community that enjoys the give and take of ideas, and that learns from each other.

The dates listed are Sundays and you should complete the assignment during the following week, BEFORE the next Sunday.

**Week One:** 1/8 Introductions to the class – the instructor, classmates, course tools.

**Week Two:** 1/15 Read *Progress*.

**Week Three:** 1/22 Complete *Progress* and respond to writing prompts with two forum postings of 150-200 words (a little less than a page).

**Week Four:** 1/29 Read *Omnivore*.

**Week Five:** 2/5 CLASS MEETING 6-8 PM Complete *Omnivore* and respond to at least one writing prompt and respond to a comment made by a classmate.

**Week Six:** 2/12 Read *Cradle* or read *Reinventing Fire*.

**Week Seven:** 2/19 Complete *Cradle* or *Reinventing Fire*. Respond to at least one writing prompt and one comment made by a classmate.

**Week Eight:** 2/26 CLASS MEETING 6-8 PM to discuss connections between readings.

**Week Nine:** 3/4 LAST DAY TO TURN IN FINAL PAPER Turn in a 1000-1500 word (4-6 page analytic and reflective paper that examines at least one idea or theme of the writings in connection to an industry with which you are familiar e.g. current or former workplace). Alternative topics for the paper are possible with my approval.

**Grading:** This course is offered Pass/No Pass. In order to pass the class all assignments must be completed in the week they are assigned in order to assure quality discussion. High Pass will be assigned for work that is consistently thoughtful, organized and contributes to the learning of others.