

# MAGIC CLASSROOM

**The best teachers  
create a class culture  
that's empowering,  
interactive, innovative  
and—literally—  
full of magic.**



---

**by Sharon Shinn**

Great teachers can transform the way students view the world. Today's business schools have become much more focused on the power of teaching and are taking active steps to promote the scholarship of teaching and assurance of learning. More teachers are embracing active learning styles, which force students to take some of the responsibility for leading and teaching the class. Others are actually examining the architecture of the classroom to decide if it is suitable for real learning.

While many teachers are actively pushing the boundaries of what's being covered and how it's being taught, four of them have had particularly notable success. Two are professors who have won awards for their classroom teaching styles, and who use a variety of techniques to draw students into active learning. Two are innovators who are offering unconventional courses in redesigned settings, one for grad students, one for executives. All of them are passionately committed to creating an environment where students thrive and education is assured.



## Motivational Speaker

Duane Varan  
Foundation Chair in New Media  
Murdoch University  
Perth, Australia

For Duane Varan, the formula is simple: A good teacher recognizes and releases student potential. “One of the things that has amazed me is that no matter how hard I push, I can’t seem to reach a barrier in terms of what students are capable of,” says Varan, who last year won the Australian Prime Minister’s Award for University Teacher of the Year, as well as the Australian Teaching Award for Economics, Business, and Related Studies.

Motivating students to do well makes up about 80 percent of his job as an educator, Varan believes. “Motivation is what separates a teacher from a PowerPoint presentation,” he says.

“Many of our social statistics are drawn from the field of agronomy, where you can take a sample of corn and

draw all sorts of conclusions based on that sample. In a lot of ways, people might be similar to corn; but you can’t really motivate an ear of corn. You can motivate students.”

One way to motivate students is to create a sense of community and culture in the classroom, no matter how big or how small the class is. In the past, when he has taught classes of 550 students, Varan embraced creative opportunities and economies of scale. For



instance, for a final project, he would give students an option of writing a paper—or a song.

“About 70 students would opt to write a song, and many would collaborate. Out of the 70, there would be about ten songs that were absolute killers,” Varan says. After picking out the top numbers, Varan would have an album professionally pressed and distributed to students, who could review for the exam by listening to the music. “The project might have been worth five percent of the grade, but students would be extremely motivated to respond to an opportunity like that,” he says.

Large classes also gave Varan an opportunity to hold an end-of-the-year talent show, in which every act or skit was related to course content. “First prize was five points up on your final exam, second prize was four points, and third prize was three. Everybody got at least a point as a consolation prize,” he says. “Again, it was very small when you calculated its impact as a percentage of the student’s overall final

ed a whole set of skills before they could work on their final projects. As structured, the class only allowed them two weeks to work on those projects, “and that was woefully inadequate in terms of the sheer magnitude of the task before them,” says Varan. So he packed all the required semester hours into the first nine weeks of class, which gave students four weeks to work on the final assignment. During that last month, he would meet with students an hour a week to make sure the projects were progressing well.

“It turned out to be an absolutely fantastic solution,” Varan says. “The quality of the students’ final projects improved drastically, and their learning objectives were exceeded dramatically. So, that time, thinking outside of the box was good.”

At the moment, Varan is teaching a much smaller undergraduate class—with as few as eight students studying the future of interactive TV. It’s so focused and so cutting-edge that global industry leaders are flying the whole class from

Australia to London so they can work with the students, an option that obviously is only available in very small classes. “We’re seen as world leaders in the area of interactive TV,” says Varan.

“What’s so exciting is that we’re able to build

our students into the model. So we actively encourage our students to join us in our research, tailor classes to dovetail into our research, and create synergies between teaching and research.”

Varan believes it’s essential for any teacher to stay connected with industry through research or consulting opportunities. “It’s even more critical today, because the cycle for innovation is so rapid now that the lag between industry practice and academic discourse is so huge. The things that are happening in industry don’t turn up in journals until two or three years after they’ve occurred. If you’re not linked with industry, there’s no way you can prepare students for the world they’re entering,” he says.

What he’d like to see most in the university of the future is less competition between universities and much more collaboration—between institutions and across disciplines. “I don’t think we’re too far off from a time we’ll see my class taught in conjunction with a class in the United States and a class in London,” he says. “I also think that universities are going to have to find a way to keep students from being slotted into a silo. They should be able to take psych units and anthropology units and anything that is going to reinforce the learning objective. In today’s world, I think it’s unlikely that all the training a student needs will be contained in a single discipline.”

## “You tinker and you discover along the way.”

grade, but you’d be amazed at how hard these kids would work and how good the quality of the skits would be. Something like that creates a very empowering culture within the class. It makes students feel they can rely on a range of their skills and talents.”

While Varan believes good teachers must try a variety of techniques to reach students, he notes that finding the right ones is a process of trial and error. He says, “I’ve taken many approaches that I’ve regretted. There are a lot of things I’ve done that I didn’t think would be great but that turned out to be absolutely wonderful. You tinker and you discover along the way.”

One technique that he views with mixed emotions is his custom of conducting magic tricks in large lecture halls. While he considers magic “brilliant” as a way of improving attendance, he now believes some tricks can trivialize the subject. For instance, while lecturing on topics associated with racism, he turned a white handkerchief and a black handkerchief into one live black-and-white rabbit. “Well, it was a *horrible* illusion,” he says. “First of all, a trick like that took a serious theme and made it seem lighthearted. Second, it was very distracting for the rest of the lecture, because all the girls just sat there staring googly-eyed at the rabbit.”

He was more successful with another radical technique: reorganizing class time for a course in which students need-

## Falling in Love

Regina Bento  
Hatfield-Merrick Distinguished Professor  
Merrick School of Business  
University of Baltimore  
Baltimore, Maryland

Regina Bento also practices magic in her classroom. On the first day of class, she waves her hands over students and says, “I am going to cast a spell upon you. From this day on, you’ll be under the spell of organizational behavior. You think you’re going to take this class on Monday, from 5:30 to 8, but no! You’ll be having a shower, and you’ll be thinking about O.B. You’ll go on a date, and you’ll think about O.B.”

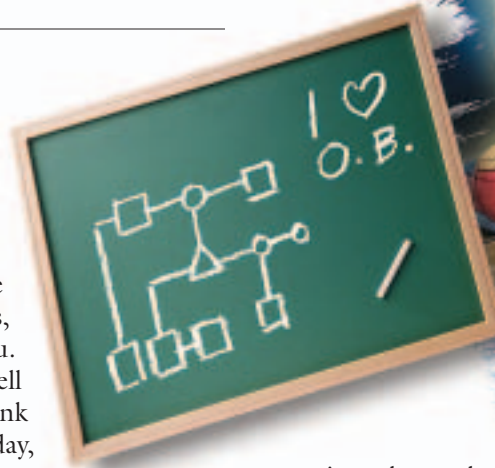
The spell often works: Her students begin to see organizational behavior in all facets of life. She recently received an e-mail from a student who had watched in fascination as a caretaker struggled to watch over 12 screaming children as the whole group traveled down the street. The student wrote, “What crossed my mind was, ‘What an interesting example of the implications of scale of control.’”

Being able to permeate a student’s way of thinking is an essential part of teaching, believes Bento, who has received numerous teaching awards from the Merrick School, the Hoffberger Center for Professional Ethics, and the University of California-Riverside. She says, “When we teach, we achieve two things: translation and transformation.”

In translation, a teacher helps students learn the basic concepts of a new discipline, such as a language. Then something magical happens: transformation. “You start thinking in that new language. You start dreaming in that language. It becomes part of you. I equate that with falling in love. Good teachers help students fall in love with their disciplines.”

Teachers can bring about that dreamy state in a variety of ways. “I try to create multiple avenues through which people with different styles are going to have an equal chance of falling in love,” Bento says. “If someone is visually oriented, I use visual materials. If somebody is abstract, I use abstract materials.”

For the past two years, her approach has been to create leadership teams from within the class; each week, “one team is responsible for our collective learning.” She adds, “It’s amazing to see the switch that happens in people’s minds when they’re in charge of learning. Now they start to ask the



questions the teacher would ask—what’s relevant, what’s the best way to convey this, how do I relate that to people’s experience? It’s amazing to see the kinds of resources they find, the energy they generate. They enjoy teaching, and they now see their roles as being leaders and managers.”

Another teaching tool Bento favors is online discussion, which she has utilized since the early ’90s. She notes that online teaching has made her examine the notion of what it means to participate. She likes to sandwich face-to-face discussions between online sessions before and after class time. If students have a chance to go over material online beforehand, they don’t have to spend the first part of class familiarizing themselves with a case; they arrive already prepared to discuss it. “They come early to class, and they start discussing the case before the class even starts,” she says. If the bell rings and the discussion is still “bubbling,” she will continue the dialogue online.

Working within University of Baltimore’s online MBA program, Bento has also taught MBA classes entirely via computer, and loves to do so. She uses a mix of textbooks and online reading materials, and orchestrates a weekly online discussion that relates to the readings. “The discussions are amazing. They become like a fix that the students have to have. Sometimes, when the class ends, they ask that the discussion forum remain open so they can keep talking among themselves. If something happens to one of them at work, they can go online and have 20 people whom they respect give them ideas about how to handle this problem. It’s quite a resource.”

She admits that it’s difficult for some teachers to learn online teaching skills—but points out that many university professors are not naturally good at teaching in the classroom, either. People studying for their Ph.D.s often are given no instruction on how to teach, she notes.

“And guess what, people with Ph.D.s are going to teach,” she adds. “People think it’s something that’s inborn; you have it or not. But that’s not true. You can get better.” Within her own field, she recommends that teachers attend the annual conference of the Organizational Behavior Teaching Society and read the *Journal of Management Education* to improve their skills.

“There you can learn everything from the philosophy of teaching to the nuts and bolts,” she says. “How do you handle a large class, how do you structure a test, how do you involve people more in participation, how do you give a good lecture?” Some schools also sponsor organizations that allow teachers to discuss effective teaching techniques and describe tactics that have worked or failed.

“There may be people who can go into the kitchen and start cooking, but some of us need Betty Crocker,” Bento jokes. “It is the same with teaching. There will be the natural-born, but we can all learn about when to add a quarter teaspoon of this or that.”

She believes that management education institutions are undergoing a cultural transformation in which even the hallowed research institutions are beginning to emphasize teaching. And to some extent, she believes schools are beginning to realize that they have created their own limitations. She describes a cartoon she watched with her children, in which a stick figure agitates to get out of its confining box—but then he becomes very afraid of the great white space that exists all around him and puts himself back in his box.

“It stayed in my mind as a symbol of what we do,” Bento says. For many years, schools have been so focused on publishing and research requirements that they have failed to realize how much energy they can devote to teaching. “Now some schools are really exploring that white space, but some of them fear the freedom. It’s still too scary. I say, the box is in our minds. We are the ones who choose what we bring in and what we bring out and how permeable that box is.”

While she expects technology to continue to reshape the classroom of the future, she expresses a hope that the fundamental exchange between student and teacher never changes. “For thousands and thousands of years, since mankind was back in the caves, we’ve had people sitting around teaching,” she says. “I hope that tradition will remain—that we continue to use teaching to transmit who we are as human beings. What I would most like to see is that sense of belonging to that millennial tradition of teachers who teach with whatever they have, whether they’re sitting around the campfire or using the latest in technology. We are all part of something magical.”

## Soul of the New Leader

Ramnath Narayanswamy  
Professor, Economics and Social Science Area  
Indian Institute of Management  
Bangalore, India

According to Ramnath Narayanswamy, today’s business students need more than an understanding of finance and accounting. They need an understanding of their souls. Through graduate-level classes he teaches in creativity and spirituality, he emphasizes personal development that leads to strong leadership.

“My experience with teaching young MBA students has underlined the critical importance of developing character and attitudes over tools and techniques,” he says. “Our students—young, bright, and intelligent though they are—often abandon their creative and learning skills at the altar of conformist behavior, mistaking the acquisition of tools and techniques for wisdom.”

He sees an intimate connection between creativity, spirituality, and leadership. “Spirituality is largely about discovering the sense of invisible order in one’s self. Creativity is about stepping out of the box, straddling boundaries, and being comfortable in that straddle. Leadership is largely about taking responsibility and ownership for both intended and unintended consequences. So in my view, the three are very deeply and profoundly linked.”

His class “Tracking Creative Boundaries” seeks to teach students to think creatively by studying the ways that creative people think. This is particularly helpful in teaching them to break free from silos of discipline. “The marketing person reduces the universe to a marketing exercise. The finance guy sees the world in purely financial terms. The goal is to learn to straddle all these disciplines, because knowledge creation really comes in the boundaries between disciplines.”

For the class, Narayanswamy brings in a wide range of artists—from the fields of theater, cinema, poetry, drama, music, and dance—who give presentations, hold interactive sessions with the students, or offer “creative biographies” of their work. “The instructor plays a critical role here, because the sessions tend to be very open-ended,” says Narayanswamy. “It’s up to the instructor to glean the insight and connect the ideas in a managerial context.”

The somewhat unorthodox course evaluation method is a learner’s diary that students keep to record their impressions of the speakers, what they’ve learned, what questions have

## **“My experience with teaching young MBA students has underlined the critical importance of developing character and attitudes over tools and techniques.”**

been raised, and how these questions might be answered. The diary allows Narayanswamy to gauge not only what the students have learned, but also their ability to relate abstract ideas to “a larger and wider sociocultural context.”

While students who already have a creative bent are the ones most likely to take this class, Narayanswamy is just as interested in signing up the skeptics, the people who are convinced that “the cultural environment and their individual value systems have nothing to do with their careers as managers.” He says, “I have to reach out to the uncreative types, and sometimes the anti-creative types, who actually need the course.”

He must also take the long view, for he knows that students might not even feel the impact of this course for years. “Transformations don’t happen overnight,” he says. “I always tell the students that the purpose of this course is to sow a seed in their souls. Like most seeds, it requires a little love, a

little fresh air, a little water. But if they take care, they eventually will have a sapling. Unfortunately, all over the world, most education is about pumping the student full of a lot of skills and tools. But this course is about liberating the mind.”

Like his course on creativity, Narayanswamy’s class called “Spirituality and Self-Development for the Global Manager” is a highly-rated elective that’s not exactly conventional. But Narayanswamy considers it absolutely in line with the needs of today’s managers. “There are some very huge public scandals plaguing corporations today,” he says. “I see them as a failure of spiritual intelligence.”

He schematically divides intelligence into analytical, emotional, and spiritual categories. “Very broadly speaking, analytical intelligence is useful in a stable situation. Emotional intelligence is useful in an uncertain situation. Spiritual intelligence is very important in an ambiguous situation. There’s far too much emphasis on analytical intelligence, less emphasis on emotional intelligence, and we do not address spiritual intelligence at all. The argument I give to managers is that spiritual understanding is terribly important because it helps you articulate yourself to yourself.”

The mechanics of the course involve looking at the nine “wisdom traditions” of the world—including Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam—through readings from the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, the Torah, the Bible, and other sources. Narayanswamy is less interested in religion as a faith to follow than as a springboard to individual awakening.

For instance, he describes the Hindu concept of Vedanta, the core of which is self-inquiry. “It exalts the individual to ask himself who he really is and explore his own divinity. Through a relentless process of self-inquiry, the individual reaches out to the divinity inside. If you look across the wisdom traditions, the message everywhere is the same.”

By studying levels of awareness that take them from themselves to the context of the environment, students learn to examine “the way they converse with the world around them. They understand their own engagement. Spirituality will help them embed the value system that is so central to making them good or bad managers.”

For the majority of students, some of these concepts might not crystallize until years in the future, when they’re faced with a moral dilemma in the workplace. “And there is no way any individual can avoid that trial by fire,” says Narayanswamy. “The question is, can I help managers engage with it? That’s the value of a course like this.”



**“Most MBA programs are designed for people who have one or two years of work experience and who came back to learn general business techniques. But that’s different from learning how to **manage**.”**

## Executive Decision

Jonathan Gosling  
Head of the Centre for Leadership Studies  
University of Exeter  
Exeter, England

Teaching business at the senior executive level presents a set of challenges that is wholly different from that of teaching at the undergraduate or MBA level, Jonathan Gosling believes. Gosling is chair of the International Masters in Practising Management (IMPM), a collaborative master’s degree program run by a consortium of business schools around the world. And he has strong views about what makes education work for upper-level managers.

“Most MBA programs are designed for people who have one or two years of work experience and who come back to learn general business techniques. But that’s different from learning how to manage, how to work with people, how to allocate, how to work collaboratively with peers and bosses—all the things that go into fulfilling a management role,” he says. “We’re rather against just taking an MBA curriculum and delivering it to a group of people who are 15 years older with more experience.”

The IMPM degree was developed around the idea of five different mindsets—the reflective, the analytic, the worldly, the collaborative, and the action. Each module is taught at a different school, including Lancaster University Management School in England; McGill University in Canada; Indian Institute of Management Bangalore; INSEAD in France; and Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Hitotsubashi University, and Kobe University, all in Japan.

“In the module for the reflective mindset, the program is called ‘Managing Oneself,’” says Gosling. “It trains managers to develop the habit of looking at what’s going on in the world and saying, ‘What is that doing to me?’ You don’t want to be reflective all the time, but it’s a skill you have to practice and learn.” The module also helps participants understand their relationships with the people above and below them in the command chain. Says Gosling, “Whenever you’re working with very senior people, the course is always partly about where they find their own authority.”

Because IMPM classes are filled with top executives from all over the world, an essential feature of the program is inter-

action among the participants. Fifty percent of class time is reserved for the teacher, 50 percent for the class. Participants sit around small round tables scattered throughout the room. Several times during each class period, the teacher stops his lecture so the students seated around each table can discuss the topics he’s just covered. “Not only do they have intriguing angles on the teacher’s points, but they often disagree among themselves,” says Gosling. “Because we’re working with adults, their sets of experiences are different from the professor’s but just as valid.”

Because the interaction between students is so crucial, Gosling and those running the other modules have been compelled to consider elements such as architecture when



designing a class setting. “It’s difficult to have a diverse learning community in a tiered amphitheater,” he says. “You can’t do it unless you have a flat room with space for people sitting around tables in sub-groups. If you’ve got those tables, you can include people who are shaky in the teaching language because the lecture stops every ten minutes or so and allows participants to check their understanding with other people around the table.”

Such a course setting encourages pluralism, which Gosling hastens to point out is not the same as diversity. In most traditional classrooms, a diverse student body is largely irrelevant, he says, “because the students read the same set of case studies, they get quizzed on the same questions, and they’re supposed to reach the same conclusions.” In a pluralistic classroom, however, participants actively interact with people who live around the world, listen to their insights—and understand how different experiences can illuminate their own.

One key part of this pluralistic learning experience in the IMPM program is the pair exchange, in which one executive takes a week to visit his counterpart in another region of the world. Sometime later, they reverse their roles as guest and host. “At first participants were skeptical,” says Gosling. “They would say, ‘Why would I want to watch someone else operate for a week in a language I don’t understand?’ But they would come back and say it was the most valuable experience they had in the course.” That part of the program has been so successful that the IMPM team has created a separate leadership program for senior executives who want to replicate these weeks as guest and host.

The concept of sharing knowledge—between individuals and between institutions—is one that Gosling hopes to see expanded for management education in the future.

He would most like to see a world in which academics feel “they have a shared and equal, but different relationship with their partners” in the education process.

He’s also committed to the idea that, in the future, managers will see their jobs in the broader context of the world. He believes that the alienation many managers feel comes about because they are forced to separate themselves as human beings from themselves as business executives—and that business schools must help managers reintegrate those two roles. Business schools also must help these managers realize that the decisions they make as executives have an impact on themselves and the world around them. He says, “Management education takes the easy way out if it ignores that.” 