



## IBM Academic Initiative Member Interview

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The following is a transcript of a podcast interview between developerWorks podcast editor Scott Laningham and Dr. Rick So from the University of California at Irvine.

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**LANINGHAM:** Welcome to this special podcast from the IBM® Academic Initiative. I'm Scott Laningham, and our guest is Dr. Rick So, from the University of California at Irvine Paul Merage School of Business.

For MBA students, Dr. So utilizes IBM WebSphere® Business Integration Modeler in an IT lab that complements their core operations management class on process management and analysis. And that's what we're going to talk about today. Dr. So, thanks for making time for us.

**SO:** Oh, thank you. You're welcome.

**LANINGHAM:** I wonder if you could begin by talking a bit about the path that led you to teaching Business Process Modeling and about your interest in that subject.

**SO:** Oh, yes, sure. Almost 10 years ago, our business school...our MBA program decided that we wanted to put a very strong emphasis on IT, information technology. So not only do we want to teach them concepts, but we also want to teach them some hands-on experience.

So what we did was that for every core class that we teach, we also teach a lab, an IT lab, an information technology lab. Our core OM class, traditionally, we focused quite a bit on manufacturing, which is something like production planning, materials requirement planning. However, as the US economy, in particular California, has shifted from more a manufacturing base to a service-based economy, so our core has shifted a little bit. So we shift from teaching a more manufacturing-focused core to one that's more on process management core.



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So in the past, our core class focused on materials requirement planning, which we teach SAP, but as the core more moves toward the process management, we want to change the lab as well from teaching MRP systems to a course that focuses on process modeling. And that's how it evolved.

And also interestingly, I think about a bit more than two years ago, I was on leave from the business school here, I went over to Singapore for over a year. And during that time, IBM set up an on demand supply chain management map at that university, in Singapore, the National University at Singapore there.

And through that interaction when I was there, I learned about some of the IBM software, in particular WebSphere. And I thought that wow, you know, that is something that we are looking for and would help us to teach our process modeling class. So when I got back from my leave from Singapore, I took over the IT lab and decided to teach IBM WebSphere in the IT lab class. That's how it's kind of evolved over the years.

**LANINGHAM:** That's great, thank you for that. I think you said a little something here about it, but I wonder if you could expand a little more on why you think it's important to teach Business Process Modeling to students, especially considering that they can't get it at every business school.

**SO:** Sure. I guess as we all know, the marketplace is changing rapidly. So as we saw, you know, today's companies are in a very competitive environment. They need to go along with those changes. In particular, they need to align the business process to go with the change.

So therefore, it's important for MBA students to understand why it's important to align the business process, to understand the impact of the business process. As a result, as I mentioned earlier, that's why we changed the content of our core OM class from a more manufacturing-based core to a process management core.



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So we think that understanding business process management is critical. But we think more than that. I think our MBA students are pretty smart. They have good ideas, they understand if you change your business process, it affects, you know, how you manage your business, a lot of benefits come with that but also there are a lot of costs in terms of implementing the change.

LANINGHAM: Sure.

SO: So therefore, it's important for them to understand the trade-offs. So usually they have a lot of good ideas, they understand the trade-off, but they really need the tool that allows them to test ideas. If I make that change, what is the potential benefit? What is the cost to go with the change, so that they could really find out if this idea would work best, but that idea doesn't really work that well.

So therefore, we want to provide them a hands-on experience, the hands-on tools so that they could really go out and test ideas when they think about how they could improve the performance of the business process. And I think the tool, this IT lab in particular using the IBM WebSphere, gives them a really good education experience in this regard.

LANINGHAM: I wonder if you could speak a little bit at this point, then, about how WebSphere Business Integration Modeler plays a part in that course and lab.

SO: Oh, it's critical. It's essential. My course is really built around WebSphere, so the student learns about the software, how to build a model using the WebSphere, how to run the simulation based on the model that they built, and are able to interpret the result...output from the software, is critical.

LANINGHAM: How do you structure the labs so that students learn enough about the tools but don't get overwhelmed by all the details? How do you deal with that?

SO: Oh, that's an interesting question. That is a really tough issue that I deal with when I teach this class. I think it's commercial software, it's



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rather complicated for a student to learn and for me to learn in particular. So what we did, we relied on the IBM instruction manual, it's very detailed, a very good manual for students to follow, they learn about the basics about using the model.

We also get guest speakers and instructors from IBM, they came in and they helped us to learn about the software. And after that, we used examples to make sure that the students know how to use the software, how to interpret the results. But let me maybe elaborate a little bit on how I designed the course.

LANINGHAM: Please, yes.

SO: In this class, to ensure the students can learn about the details of the software, we spend a lot of time just learning the software, using the software during class time. So we meet five times, three hours each during a 10-week quarter. So we meet once every other week. It's a very small class. We intend to do that; we only have about 15 students in each class. We have...the team support is available to answer students' questions when they're using the software.

And then we build our class based on three examples. The first example comes from the IBM course manual, a very detailed example, intention is have the students learn about the basics in the software.

Then the second example is a case study. So the student, you know, reads about the case, understands the issue in terms of how they need to manage the business process. Once they understand the issues they go to the WebSphere and build a model to address those issues and think about what they could do to improve the business process in that case.

And then the third example, they do a class project. So I ask them to go out, find a real business process, look at how they do, think about what they could do to improve the performance of the process, and actually come back and build a model to analyze the performance. And then test out some of the recommendations, the ideas, to see what...if the ideas really work using the software.



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LANINGHAM: That sounds very comprehensive.

SO: Yes, indeed, we think so.

LANINGHAM: Now, Dr. So, do you think this question I had about what teaching points are particularly important to success in the lab. Do you feel like you just answered that, or would that still be a question worth asking?

SO: I think learning the software, the tool, is great. I mean, students like that. They like the tool, they're able to have a real tool that they could test out their ideas. But I think they also like to learn about how they interpret the results from the model so that...it relates back to the original process and say if they make that change, how would that affect the underlying business process. Would it work or not?

So interpreting the result and being able to, you know, try out different ideas is critical. Not just learning the tool, but how to use the tool and apply the results to analyze it, the underlying process, I think is critical.

LANINGHAM: You know, I was wondering, when a student completes your class, what's your idea of a successful experience for them? How would you describe that?

SO: I would say, you know, as I mentioned, we have a core class that covers the basic concepts of operations management, in particular in process management. And after this lab, they actually have a commercial tool.

They say, well, I look at the process, I'm actually able to build a model to find out whether my idea works or not. And then when they go out and in the job market, I think this experience with a commercial package in process management and modeling really helps them. That is the intention of my class.

LANINGHAM: So they're ready to hit the road running, in other words. Right?

SO: Hopefully, yes. [LAUGHTER]



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LANINGHAM: Dr. So, thank you so much for your time. This has been very educational.

SO: Thank you.

LANINGHAM: Again, our guest has been Dr. Rick So, from the University of California at Irvine Paul Merage School of Business.

Faculty members, we invite you to become a member of IBM's Academic Initiative and to download the WebSphere Business Integration Modeler at no charge for teaching and/or research purposes. Please see [ibm.com/university](http://ibm.com/university) and click on Academic Initiative. To learn more about WebSphere Business Integration Modeler, go to [ibm.com/developerworks](http://ibm.com/developerworks), click on **WebSphere** in the left nav; then under **Product Categories**, click on **Business Integration**.

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Thanks for listening. I'm Scott Laningham, and this has been a special podcast from the IBM Academic Initiative.