Experiential Learning:
A Case of Business Skills Development Education in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In a predominantly Chinese society, the Hong Kong higher education system has been going through a transition from a process-oriented approach to an outcome-based approach to teaching and learning since 2004. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University took a leading position in such a move. We adopted an outcome-oriented model to curriculum design by incorporating clear articulation of intended learning outcomes, designing teaching and assessment methods which align with the intended outcomes. Effective university education does not only provide students with the opportunities to acquire subject knowledge, but business skills for lifelong development in the society. The need to foster students' business skills has been stipulated at the institutional, faculty and department level. In tackling with such need, the Faculty of Business adopted two approaches in fostering students' business skills. The first approach was by means of introducing specific and separate mandatory subjects into the curriculum, such as business skills development course. The other approach was to embed the development of business skills integrally into the subjects of the mainstream curriculum by introducing new curricular emphases, teaching methods and educational technologies. Students were exposed to a variety of cultural diversity, interactive learning environment in group and individual setting. Formative and summative assessment activities were organized. The experience of implementing the course learning outcomes through experiential learning is shared in this paper. Keywords: experiential learning, generic learning outcome, outcome-based education, alignment of learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University aspires to produce graduates with the attributes of responsible citizens and leaders of tomorrow. The University believes that by adopting an outcome-based approach to curriculum development, teaching, learning, assessment and quality assurance, the University will be able to improve the quality of its educational provision to ensure students' attainment of the desired learning outcomes. The pioneer proponent of outcome-based education encompassed a strong notion of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999, 2003; Macht, S. and Ball, S. 2016). The focus is on what students can learn, and align teaching and assessment to those outcomes.

PolyU's model of outcome-based approach has gradually taken shape over the years, as the PolyU community constantly reviews its good practices, makes reference to sound educational theories, and learns from experiences in student learning outcomes assessment.

A STAND-ALONE COURSE ON BUSINESS SKILLS

In this great century, the growth of information is exponential and the nature of and skill requirements for work are changing. Hence, the development of business skills has become a more prominent focus in education. Effective university education does not only provide students with the opportunities to acquire subject knowledge, but business skills for lifelong development in the society. The label of 'business skills' is named differently around the world. See Table 1.

The meaning of it varies in philosophical positions (Barrie, 2004, 2006; Hughes, C. 2012). Many universities also produced curriculum maps which demonstrate the development of personal skills within existing curricula (Barrie, 2005; Hager, Holland and Beckett, 2002), but the effectiveness also depends on its approach of implementation and active engagement of teaching staff.

The experience of implementing the Business Skills Development course by aligning programme outcomes with subject outcomes is discussed in this paper. A number of teaching and learning activities was adopted to facilitate the development and learning of desired outcomes (Scott, 2016; Ferguson, 2016). In this paper, we focus on discussing the experiential learning education process.

IMPLEMENTATION OF OUTCOME-BASED EDUCATION AT BUSINESS SKILLS DEVELOPMENT COURSE LEVEL

During the start of the course, students are distributed with the course outline. Subject syllabus containing clear statements of the learning outcomes to be achieved was stated at the course outline. The lecturer went through all the learning objectives with students, ensuring common understanding regarding university's expectation on their performance. The assessment guidelines were also communicated and distributed to all students of the business skills development course.

Students were given enough formative feedback during the subject, and before the final summative assessment, to provide them with a basis for improvement as they proceed through the semester.

Before students carry out an assessment task, they were told, and should understand, the criteria against which they would be assessed. They should understand the level of achievement required to get an 'A', 'B' or 'C'.

Assessments were set appropriate for the learning outcomes for the subject. Please refer to Table 2 for details of the assessment tasks.

Students were exposed to a variety of topics on business skills and critical thinking (Desai, M. et al. 2016). They were given the chances to practice these skills by engaging at the teaching and learning activities described in the table 2.

EASY, EFFORTLESS AND ENJOYABLE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPROACH

A number of interactive activities were conducted during the class time.

- *The Learning Pyramid Game* is played. Students could learn the percentage of overall new information retention. With an impressive 90% retention rate, the most successful method of content retention is through teaching others. After the game, students would then be asked to *teach another student* for two minutes. It can be a concept, some knowledge, or an experience. The student could ask questions during the teaching. Then they changed roles and repeat the exercise. After the student to student exercise, some students would be invited to volunteer to teach the whole class and reflect on the learning experience.
- *Book Introduction* – Students were given an opportunity to introduce a book within two minutes in front of the students. One extra mark was given to the presenting student as an incentive. In some classes, almost 70% of the students presented books.
- *Places Introduction* – Students were given another opportunity to introduce a place within two minutes in front of the students. One extra mark was given to the presenting student as an incentive. In some classes, almost 90% of the students presented places they have lived or travelled.
- *Global Outlook Quiz* - A group exercise for students to compete with each other. 16 questions and each with 4 choices were given to the students. The questions cover 5 continents with focus on business, culture, religion and general knowledge. Most students could answer correctly 10 out of 16 questions.

- *Steve Jobs's You-tube Video* – A video of the late Steve Jobs on his talk to Stanford University graduates in 2005 was shown to students in class. The three stories, connecting the dots, love and loss, death told by Steve Jobs was discussed in groups and in the whole class. The notion of "Stay hungry, Stay foolish" was also discussed and reflected in class. Most students were influenced by the notion "follow your heart".
- *Multi-cultural Mistakes You-tube Video*- was shown to students in class. This is follow by a discussion on the deal breaking cultural mistakes a white American insurance agent made in this short video. Most students could spot easily 8 to 10 mistakes the salesman made in selling to a Mexican customer. However, there were a total of 40 mistakes he made and many were not discovered.
- *Humour Training* – A special class was organized for students to learn sense of humour which is an important skill in the business world. Each student is required to deliver a joke in English. This activity proved to be one of most enjoyable and useful one in the course.
- *Juggling Training* – A special training was organized for students to learn how to juggle three objects with two hands. Most student can complete one round of juggling after proper training and one hour of practices. This activity proved to be an enjoyable and useful one in the course. Students could understand that life is like a juggle and managers must juggle well to be effective.
- *Golf and Tennis Training* – Students were given two hours training on these two popular sports. Most students in Hong Kong had no idea how golf is played. The learning point from golf is that every stroke (everything) counts. The learning point from tennis is that every game starts from a level playing score.

TABLE 1

Countries	Inter-changeable Terms
Australia	Generic competencies, Key competencies, employability skills, generic skills
Canada	Employment skills
Germany	Key qualifications
U.K.	Core skills, key skills, common skills
U.S.	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how
Singapore	Transferable skills

TABLE 2

Business Skills Trained	Teaching and Learning Activities	Assessment Tasks
Oral English Communication	Group Discussion	English Presentation on a new product
Creative and Critical Thinking	Debate Interactive game Current affairs discussion	Analysis of Business Case Reflective Essay
Self Evaluation	Learning Games	Reflective Essay/Creative work/Video
Global outlook and diversity	Learning Games Quiz Video show Guest speaker talks Group Discussion	Reflective Essay Group Project

- *Guest Speaker Talks*- Guest speakers from England, Dublin, New York, Russia, Australia, Canada, China, India, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa were invited to share on the topic on "the art of global thinking".
- *An Interactive Game* on UN actions on North Korea's military conflict with South Korea was played with 250 students.

In educating business skills, several multi-sensor experiential learning and teaching techniques and active learning strategies have been used. In short, the interactive exercise enhances students' learning through instant response in a fun way. It also aims to promote students' creativity and involvement in solving their problems.

DISCUSSION

How can the climate for racial/ethnic diversity be improved to enhance the learning environment?

Two decades ago, it was almost 100% local students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Now, the majority, over 90%, of the students is still local students and a small percentage of students are mainland China and an even smaller percentage from Asia, Europe and Americas. The percentage of 'non-traditional' students is still low in Hong Kong Polytechnic University or any other universities in Hong Kong. From almost nothing to 10%, there is a big increase in non-local student numbers. Along with this increase in numbers there has been a concomitant increase in the need to educate diversity at higher education levels.

Improving the climate for racial/ethnic diversity may require some fundamental institutional changes. Most fundamental is a conceptual shift in thinking about how diversity is key to the institution's overall priorities for teaching and learning, which also requires a change in how non-local students are regarded or valued. Both teachers and students must see clear benefits for their students. Also, institutions can structure opportunities for increased interaction and involvement among students from diverse racial/ethnic groups in the classroom and outside the classroom. In addition, if teachers are to actively include the diverse students that they now have in their classrooms, they have to use a wide range of teaching strategies. The lecture mode is particularly difficult for NESB (Non English Speaking Background) students (Barrington, E. 2004). This is especially important to consider in the context of the increased diversity of students now involved in post-secondary education in Hong Kong. Teaching predominantly in the traditional way misses important opportunities to develop interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence in their students—both of which are highly valued in the workplace and in the personal lives of the students.

New methods must be implemented to allow students to see that they need not necessarily be excluded if they do not register highly in verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligence. The students should be able to use their own strengths and not be marginalized by having to focus on traditional ways of learning.

CONCLUSION

By delivering a variety of experiential learning activities on a separate mandatory core subjects on business skills development, students are made aware of the importance of business skills. Overall, it can be considered as a special and effective course to achieve the desired learning outcome as stipulated in the course outline.

At the moment, teaching and learning in tertiary institutions is often conservative and teacher-centered, and favors certain kinds of abilities over others. Interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence are important—especially in the workplace—yet these intelligences are seldom given much attention in teaching/ learning in higher education. More methods could be utilized in higher education, especially in view of the considerable increase in student diversity. By encouraging students to use their different intelligences they are more likely to find meaning in their studies and their learning will be greatly enhanced. The new experiential learning approach might be able to change the negative view that many tertiary students have about their learning environment.

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