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ACTIVE LEARNING IN A PROFESSIONAL UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

At Alfred University's College of Business an Active Learning culture has been developing over the past two decades. Faculty in all academic disciplines have gradually transformed their pedagogical styles to include modules that integrate theoretical concepts with experiential applications. This paper documents the current status of Active Learning as a major tenet in the college's undergraduate curriculum and concludes with a discussion of current issues in the development of this effort.

THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVE LEARNING

Bonwell and Eison (1991, 1992) define active learning as anything that "involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing." Whether it is called action, bridge, transformational, proactive, or experiential learning, it is fundamentally an integrative approach to bring theory to reality. It is theory in practice. Recent research supports the value of active learning in general education and personal skills (Kuh, et. al. 1997).

Active learning is based on the theory that learning is a dynamic, social construction. Growth occurs where one's world view is challenged in an environment which links theory, action and reflection. Argyris (1985), in his seminal research on organizational learning and innovation, pointed out the need to challenge implicit, often cherished, beliefs to foster growth. Kegan and Lakey (1984, 226), apply this "constructivist view" to individuals in noting: "people do not grow by having their realities only confirmed. They grow by having

them challenged...and being supported to listen to, rather than defend against, that challenge."

The constructivist view of learning also emphasizes the dual importance of reflection and integration. Schon's (1987) "reflection in action" theory, for example, speaks to the phenomena of individuals constructing integrative theories to guide behavior when faced with the "messiness" of real-world experiences. Performance of an active learning experience, in the words of Wutzdorff and Hutchings (1988, 76) provides "the integration of knowing and doing." They go on to suggest that "underlying" this view is the presence of reflection where "students are asked to think seriously about themselves as learners, to learn how they learn, and how they can learn more powerfully."

**RELATION OF ACTIVE LEARNING TO
THE ALFRED UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
OF BUSINESS (COB) MISSION**

The COB mission statement reads, in part:

In all of our actions, we seek to assure that our students and faculty attain distinction in their professional lives. Our primary vehicle for this is the development and delivery of programs of instruction and scholarship in professional management. Recognizing that we live in a world in which technical advances, political shifts and social changes are all occurring rapidly, our principal objective is to be a dynamic learning organization that prepares our students for leadership roles in their professions.

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One of the College's objectives, moreover, is to "Provide active learning opportunities which develop distinction through the acquisition of professional business skills."

The mission statement is a commitment to the individuation of growth and achievement as the College fosters leadership development. Active learning is seen as providing an alternative approach to "professional management" and student preparation for "leadership roles in their professions" within the broader context of society, the complexity of modern organization, and, given the limitations of more traditional modes of professional management education.

As an educational philosophy, active learning provides students with an opportunity to take personal responsibility for learning. Active learning finds learners "in-charge" of transforming an ambiguous, discontinuous and chaotic environment into a body of useable knowledge and a basis for leadership. (Mouton and Blake, 1984)

In moving from a mission statement to a set of curriculum tactics and policies, faculty are faced with an array of choices. These options, summarized quite effectively by Bonwell and Sutherland (1996) are manifested, to a significant extent, in the COB "case study" detailed below.

ACTIVE LEARNING IN FOUNDATION COURSES

The COB is accredited by AACSB - The International Association for Management Education. One of the areas that this organization assesses is the ability of an institution to deliver a standard body of knowledge. However, the method of delivery is not specified. In fact, exploration of alternatives to the standard lecture approach is encouraged. AACSB accreditation implies quality and continuous improvement in undergraduate education for business administration. Consequently, the COB has opted for a mutually

active approach (Instructor-Student-Client) to enhance the students' retention of fundamental concepts.

Currently, active learning in "professional core" business courses exists in the freshmen, junior and senior years (Table 1). Utilization of this pedagogical method in required second year courses is currently being explored. Consistent with governance norms pertaining to curriculum change, faculty are not directed to utilize this approach but are made aware of the approach's advantages.

FRESHMAN FOUNDATION

Part I

In their first semester, all freshmen enroll in a 3-credit course in Business Perspectives (MIS 101). This course has two emphases:

i. The first emphasis is designed to help develop a "personalized" perspective of contemporary business systems and leadership skills. Reading, lecture, class discussions and written assignments are directed toward establishing personal and professional goals and creating a basis for ongoing leadership development. Entre-preneurship, leadership and information are themes that are threaded into the course curriculum. To support this project, 12 faculty (including 2 non-COB faculty) have written monographs from their discipline's perspective and have incorporated the three themes of entrepreneurship, leadership and information in their works. Each faculty member presents his/her material and requires each student to submit a critical analysis about the topic. The intent is to have each student complete a critical analysis about the topic. The intent is to have each student complete a critical personal self-assessment relative to these concepts. This assessment culminates in preparation of a personal and professional plan.

**TABLE 1
CORE CURRICULUM ACTIVE LEARNING**

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>COURSE</u>	<u>COURSE NAME</u>	<u>ACTIVITIES</u>	<u>ASSESSMENT</u>
Freshman (Part I)	MIS 101	Business & Computer Systems	Focus Groups Computer Skills	Self-Assessment Presentations
Freshman (Part II)	MIS 190	Information Systems	Innovator Research Innovation Research Critical Thinking Ethics Personal Portfolio Team Building Skills	Learning Reports Presentations Personal Portfolio
Sophomore	(under review)			
Junior	MGT 328	Organizational Behavior	Client Observation	Report
Junior	MKT321	Principles of Marketing	Marketing Simulation Teamwork	Report
Senior	BUS 499	Business Policy	Business Plan Competition (proposed)	Business Plans

ii. The second emphasis seeks to develop an understanding of fundamental computer concepts. Students gain proficiency in the most widely used microcomputer applications such as spreadsheets and presentation software; develop competency with electronic mail, the Internet and web site design; and develop sensitivity of ethical issues associated with the use of information technology. More importantly, students demonstrate computer literacy skills in making formal class presentations using presentation software.

Part II

In the second semester of the freshman year, all students must enroll in Management Information Systems (MIS 190), a three credit hour course. This course has two points of emphasis:

1. Inter-related theory and application of Management Information Systems and

2. Development of professional skills

However, these two points are not covered separately; they are intertwined in the course curriculum. In addition to a standard text in Management Information Systems, the class typically utilizes a “readings” book (S. Baase, A Gift of Fire) or a factual novel (C. Stoll, The Cuckoo's Egg) as a vehicle to present and discuss ethical issues in the business environment. Critical thinking is measured by using weekly written assignments. Team building, entrepreneurial and leadership skills are evaluated by monitoring group presentations and reports. Personal focus is partially based upon the development of a concise personal portfolio. The intent is to provide to a student a wealth of opportunities and methods to:

- learn the material
- develop self-competence and focus
- mature into leaders and team players
- learn how to be critical and innovative thinkers

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Junior Year

All third year students are required to take Organizational Behavior (MGT 328) and Principles of Marketing (MKT 321). Both of these courses build upon and nurture the skills presented and utilized in the freshman year. In the marketing course students are assigned to a team that will compete with other teams in a computer driven simulation of an industry. Each team represents a corporation within the industry. Leadership skills, team building concepts, entrepreneurial efforts, innovative decision making and assuming a competitive posture come to the fore as each team's corporation rises and falls in a competitive industrial environment.

In the Organizational Behavior class, once again students are assigned to a team to evaluate the personal and decision making style of a manager or supervisor. However, in this course, each team has to find a client. The client may be the shift manager at a fast food store, a shop foreman in a manufacturing facility or a manager in a large firm. After a series of on-site visits to the client, the team is required to submit both oral and written reports on its findings. The analysis includes not only an evaluation of the client's strengths and weaknesses but also a plan of action for improvement in managing personnel in the organization. (An important observation from the faculty member that utilizes active learning in this course is that she thought she was expected to have her students involved in projects with real clients. In fact, inclusion of active learning was not mandated but the College's culture nurtured it.)

Senior Year

Historically, colleges of business utilize the Business Policy course as a senior capstone experience. The intent is to have students integrate previous academic learning and

professional skills. Critical thinking, entrepreneurial propensity and leadership skills are essential at this point. A case study approach with team analyses and presentations is the standard fare, as it is for most schools. In addition, a "live case study" approach has been introduced utilizing a pool of executives-in-residence. In prior years, "standard" strategic management text and case books have been supplemented with other books (Ishmael, The Wealthy Barber) to enrich class discussion. Moreover, the College is exploring incorporating a business plan competition into the Business Policy course. This approach will be implemented in Fall 2000.

While all students are exposed to a myriad of learning methods throughout the core curriculum, consistent application of active learning concepts is endemic neither in each and every required course nor in every year. As more and more faculty become aware of the benefits of this pedagogical approach, the depth and breadth of its use is expected to increase.

ACTIVE LEARNING IN DISCIPLINE COURSES

Active Learning in the College of Business started in advanced elective courses (Table 2). As faculty members saw the results of this instructional method, more courses incorporated segments that included links to practitioners of the discipline.

Some courses rely on active learning as the primary instructional method for learning the basic tenets of the course material. For example, as part of the course requirements in Taxation (ACC 470) students majoring in accounting participate in the Internal Revenue Service's program for Volunteers in Tax Assistance (VITA). Students taking advanced courses in Management Information Systems work in teams to analyze the information needs for a client as well as design and implement a computer based information system for that client. Advanced courses in Marketing require

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students to act as facilitators in freshman focus groups and to design and implement a market survey for a client. Students in advanced Finance courses can participate in the Student

Managed Investment Fund (SMIF), which is responsible for overseeing a quarter million dollar stock portfolio.

TABLE 2
DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ACTIVE LEARNING

<u>COURSE</u>	<u>COURSE NAME</u>	<u>ACTIVITY</u>
ACC 441	Auditing	Small business audit review
ACC 470	Taxation	Volunteers in Tax Assistance (VITA)
FIN 454	Security Analysis	Student Managed Investment Fund
MIS 410	Electronic Commerce	Client web site design
MIS 466	Systems Analysis	Project analysis for client
MIS 465	Data Base	Systems design for client
MKT 452	Market Research	Focus groups; Questionnaires
MKT495	Marketing Practicum	Client Project
ECO 360	Environmental Economics	Client Project
FIN 454	Securities Analysis	Student Managed Investment Fund
BUS 495	Entrepreneurship	Client Case Studies/Consultation
BUS 200	Family Business	Client Case Studies/Consultation

FIELD EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENT

Since 1994, the College of Business has had a mandatory field experience for all graduates. In short, students must complete a credit bearing field experience course as a condition of graduation. This requirement may be satisfied in one of the three following ways:

- Summer Internship
- Specific Discipline Course (pre-designated)

In 1998-1999, 56% of the COB's graduating seniors completed an Internship for academic credit. Table 2 lists courses that students can take to fulfill the College's field experience requirement. Of note is that, for 1999 graduates, 50% completed more than one credit bearing field experience while 35% completed three or more of these experiences.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

The College of Business has nine active student organizations that are affiliated with national professional organizations (Table 3). Most students participate actively in at least one of these organizations. Consequently, they are able to develop leadership and entrepreneurial skills. Each semester, most of these student organizations bring a leading practitioner on campus, make a site visit to a corporation or organization, and attend a monthly meeting of the national organization. Members of such student organizations such as Students in Free Enterprise, Financial Management Association, American Marketing Association and American College of Healthcare Executives not only attend but also actively participate in the annual national meeting. For example, twice each year students involved in SMIF give a written report and an oral presentation to the University's trustees on the status of the fund.

**TABLE 3
STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

ACHE	American College of healthcare Executives
AITP	Association of Information Technology Professionals
AMA	American Marketing Association
CWA	Career Women's Association
FBL	Future Business Leaders
FMA	Financial Management Association
IMA	Institute of Management Accountants
SHRM	Society for Human Resource Management
SIFE	Students in Free Enterprise
SMIF	Student Managed Investment Fund

**STUDENT RESEARCH, PAPERS
AND PRESENTATIONS**

Each year there are several students who have the inclination to pursue a topic in more depth. Working in conjunction with a faculty member, these students research a particular topic; document and analyze their findings; and present their analysis to interested groups within the university. Oftentimes these research efforts lead to the students' papers being accepted for presentation at academic meetings such as the Decision Sciences Institute, the New York State Economics Association, and the International Academy of Management. Several papers have been selected for publication in a refereed journal or in proceedings of a conference.

CONCLUSION AND CURRENT ISSUES

Active learning has permeated both the core discipline and the functional academic areas of the College of Business at Alfred University. While not all faculty members utilize this pedagogical approach, it has gained cross-disciplinary acceptance as instructors realize that students are more engaged in the learning process when an action approach is utilized. Current issues impacting the College's commitment to active learning include

assessment, integration, and realizing continuous improvement.

Assessment

Consistent with the College's mission of being a "dynamic learning organization," and in light of the AACSB commitment to documentation of continuous improvement, the COB needs to develop richer and more comprehensive assessment protocols for its active learning components. In some cases, such assessment is already in place, of course. The COB internship program includes a documented series of reporting requirements, evaluations, controls and learning assessment steps. This documentation provides an assessment of quality and is an essential program management tool. Moreover, in the case of internships, there appears to be research supporting positive professional development impact. (Taylor, 1988)

More generally, however, there appears to be a need to develop summative measures for assessing the extent to which students "attain distinction" as expressed in the COB mission statement. Proposals to develop individual learning portfolios warrant serious discussion, for example. These would be consistent with the active learning philosophy of individualization – capturing

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student learning, reflecting on its implications, and projecting forward in terms of personal and professional goals.

In addition, to strengthen assessment capacity, the College is developing and refining graduating senior alumni surveys.

Integration

The COB culture has shifted over the last two decades in embracing active learning. Like many similar institutions, the COB has struggled with finding the appropriate balance of teaching – learning paradigms. Finding this balance is a process unique to each institution given its mission, student mix and profile, and faculty composition (Gilbert, 1996). This process is very much underway in the COB, but there is much work to be done. For example, while the culture and mission have supported active learning innovations, the pattern of adoption of such approaches has been both uneven and incomplete. More critically, the fit among the COB's various active learning components has yet to be fully rationalized or articulated. Such fit is for better and worse, "loosely coupled."

In terms of next steps, several options are suggested. Faculty discourse is needed to address the merits and mechanics of structuring a four-year sequence of active learning exposure in the professional core curriculum. As noted in Table 1, the most obvious discussion needs to be given to the Sophomore year exposure. More critically, perhaps, is the need for integration of experiences across these four years. Fortunately, such discussion is underway as part of the College's ongoing curriculum assessment process.

Note that realizing integration may require changes in teaching style, course content, staff deployment and the like. Curriculum assessment and curriculum change has obvious implications for faculty development and, in some cases,

recruitment. Policy decisions and the deployment of resources can, at this level, support the culture shift supportive of a true commitment to active learning.

An Environment of Continuous Improvement

Assessment and integration efforts support the practice of continuous improvement. Integration of active learning approaches at course-specific levels has been consensual and is evolving. The greater University environment endorses this effort. "Active learning" is acknowledged as a core principle in both the University's strategic plan and its current capital campaign. The concept has wide endorsement among the University senior leadership group. Maintaining this strategic focus at the University level, a responsibility of College-level leadership, provides a basis for resource support.

References Available Upon Request