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IMPROVING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN MANAGEMENT
SCIENCE AND BUSINESS WRITING COURSES USING
THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

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ABSTRACT

The 'Seven Principles in Action' have been implemented with great success in two undergraduate business courses. As a consequence student apathy towards academics has been reduced, class attendance and attentiveness have improved, curiosity about content has been aroused, cooperation among students has improved and greater involvement in the course has been observed even in the weaker students. We have adopted the seven principles and practiced them in unique ways. Our implementation methods are new and extend the "seven principles" to produce desirable results. We have provided concrete details of the unique ways of implementation actually practiced in these two courses. Details about benefits obtained have been provided.

INTRODUCTION

Student performance is the most important outcome of education. In the 1990's this has been repeatedly emphasized by accrediting agencies, legislatures and employers. In the institutions of higher learning we need to do whatever it takes to promote student learning and high student performance. While the goal is clear and laudable, its achievement is not easy because the typical undergraduate student is apathetic about education. The goal for many students is to achieve a grade of "C," get a degree and move on. However, this grade of "C" in a course typically suggests that the student merely met requirements to pass the course. Such an outcome is not useful to anyone. Students suffer because they can't

function properly. Businesses that hire these students suffer because employees who lack fundamental skills are not productive. Thus, no one has gained.

It is not difficult to understand reasons for their apathy. The typical undergraduate student becomes apathetic towards academics because of what they perceive to be unsurmountable hindrances in the pursuit of academic excellence. They need to juggle work with academics and family needs. They need to balance extra-curricular activities with academics. They suffer from low motivation because they perceive academics to be of low relevance. They have difficulty adjusting to different faculty teaching styles.

These hurdles are not likely to disappear. The consequent apathy and lack of motivation in the typical student prevent them from pursuing high academic goals. Thus, the first step for the instructor is to overcome student apathy and motivate them to become attuned to the important objective of high student performance.

Over the years we have sought an educational process that would overcome student apathy and get them attuned to the objective of high performance. We have experimented with, adopted and adapted a set of seven principles popularized by Hatfield (1995) and others to achieve these two objectives. We have used this approach successfully in courses in Management Science and Business Writing.

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Both these courses are skill based courses. As a consequence, the implementation of the “seven principles” had to be done in many unique ways. The purpose of this paper is to describe the many unique ways the “seven principles” were implemented in these two courses.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

Initiated by a series of federal level reports on undergraduate education ((Bennett, 1984) and Newman, 1985)), the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) conducted a series of conferences in the mid 1980’s and identified 7 key principles which characterize the practices of educationally successful undergraduate institutions. The principles were published in their bulletin (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Details of practice of the principles at various undergraduate institutions are described by Hatfield (1995). The principles are summarized in Table 2 and discussed below.

TABLE 2
THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

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1. Encourage student-faculty Contact.
 2. Encourage cooperation among students.
 3. Encourage active learning.
 4. Give Prompt feedback.
 5. Emphasize Time on task.
 6. Communicate high expectations.
 7. Respect diverse talents and different ways of learning.
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The first principle emphasizes student-faculty contact. The second principle encourages cooperation among students. The third principle encourages active learning. Some forms of active learning are homework, projects, peer teaching and class discussion. The fourth principle emphasizes prompt feedback. The fifth principle highlights the need for time on task. More time on

task leads to better learning. The sixth principle urges faculty to communicate high expectations. The seventh principle points to the differences that exist in the backgrounds of the students and urges faculty to respect that diversity.

GETTING STUDENTS PREPARED: THE FIRST FEW EXPERIENCES

All students come to class with a set of expectations; their experiences and personalities frame their expectations and affect how they will act and thus what they will take from a class.

Management Science students enter the class with a great deal of trepidation. They assume they will do poorly. They have no confidence in their own quantitative skills. In order to get them motivated it is important to eliminate their fear. One important teaching strategy is used to boost student confidence and encourage student involvement. The first two quizzes and first two homework assignments are deliberately designed to be easy and are patterned after material covered comprehensively in class. As a consequence over 90% of the students typically make over 90% of the points in these four tasks. High achievement in these four tasks leads to a positive feeling about the course, an improvement in their own confidence levels and a belief that class attendance will improve their performance.

On the other hand, Business Writing students feel generally confident that with just a little review of the principles of grammar, they will write effectively. A “can-do” attitude is certainly preferred since it generally moves students to act. Because they feel they are good communicators and writers, they are more inclined to attend classes and to complete their homework assignments. They learn to give each other constructive feedback. This creates a double learning effect; they are adding to their

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knowledge by correcting another students' papers and they reinforce their own writing repertoire. To improve their writing techniques students are encouraged to rewrite their assignments. Receiving effective feedback (and an appropriate reward! reinforcement), students are more often motivated to redo their assignments.

DIFFERENCES IN IMPLEMENTATION

In this section we describe the different strategies used to implement the seven principles in these two courses.

Principle 1: Student-Faculty contact

In the Management Science course, student-faculty contact is improved by use of 10 posted office hours per week, permitting meetings by appointment and by use of class work under the instructor's supervision. The Business Writing instructor encourages student-faculty contact in numerous ways that include contact via telephone, fax, E-mail and posted office hours.

Principle 2: Encourages cooperation among students

Management Science techniques are an important set of tools for the modern business manager. Each student must be able to execute a variety of quantitative techniques at a prescribed level. Thus, group work is not the main focus of the course. However, students are encouraged to work together in helping each other understand the material and in forming groups for the purpose of preparing for tests. In Business Writing everyone can achieve 100 or the maximum number of points. Students must believe this and trust the instructor before students will fully cooperate and help each other. Students are asked to swap homework assignments and then to write on that sheet of paper, constructive comments about their

partner's work. Specific suggestions concerning appropriate feedback are suggested by the instructor during a class discussion. Assignments are returned to students with constructive feedback. They are free to write additional comments as they believe are necessary.

Principle 3: Encourages active learning.

Management Science techniques are primarily algebraic techniques. Students have great difficulty in visualizing the use of these techniques. They are involved in problem scenarios that they can relate to. This may include problems like designing a minimum cost diet for hospital patients or a minimum cost food mix for pets.

Business Writing students are required to know and explain basic rudiments of grammar. For an instructor to pass on this information in lecture format could prove immensely dry. Inducing students to present these concepts to their peers gets students involved in their own learning process.

Principle 4: Prompt Feedback

This principle is quite important in the Management Science course and is implemented in two ways. First, assignments are graded and returned by the next class period. Second, a reason is provided why points were deducted. This gives the students an opportunity to defend their work to win some points back.

The Business Writing class provides just in time grading in many situations. Regular quizzes are held. Upon completion of the quizzes, students hand the chapter questions to the instructor, who corrects them on the spot. Students are performing a different activity during this time. Since this is a writing class, it is limited to 20 students and this is easily possible.

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Principle 5: Time on task.

Management Science techniques are inherently difficult for the average business student. In order to learn the techniques properly, “time on task” is an extremely important principle. The instructor classifies the techniques to be taught as being “very important,” “important,” and “to be covered.” A different strategy is used to teach techniques in the different categories. If the technique is “very important”, more class room time is spent on it followed by graded homework, opportunity for re-work and quizzes! tests on the material. If the technique is “important”, less class time is spent on the material. Homework is assigned but not graded. The material is tested. If the technique is “to be covered”, very little class time is spent on it. No homework is assigned. But the material is tested.

As discussed in the previous section, the Business Writing class offers students regular opportunities that re-enforce learning by spending more time on task. First, they participate in classroom exercises on chapter assignments. Second, weekly quizzes encourage students to keep up with their reading and class preparations. These quizzes come in different formats that include questions on style, format and also activities related to correcting grammatical errors. Student competence in spelling is enhanced in another unique time on task method. Every meeting of the Business Writing class consists of a spelling B. For each class meeting, students are required to learn to spell about 25 words from a list of the most “frequently misspelled” words. The activity becomes competitive because the class is split into two teams competing against each other.

Principle 6: Communicate high expectations.

In the Management Science course, this is the only principle that needed to be implemented in a round about way. Quantitative techniques are truly difficult for business school students. The most important reason is that they have not been well prepared for these techniques. As a consequence, setting high arbitrary expectations for them does not serve any useful purpose. What has been successful in the past is to set somewhat high expectations and then to do what it takes (time, patience, etc.) to help the students achieve those goals.

Many students enter the Business Writing class believing that in order to improve their writing they simply need a little review. Students expect to submit a memorandum, letter or report without re-writing them. The first homework scores are generally poor and acts as a wake up call for them. Standards are kept high. Students need to re-work until they meet the standards.

Principle 7: Respect diverse talents and different ways of learning.

This principle is very important for the Management Science class. Students have a wide diversity in their quantitative skills. Sometimes this may mean that the same problem may have to be solved in two different ways. In the Business Writing class diversity of student talent is taken into account in many ways. For example, the weaker students are provided with greater amount of instructor time on a one on one basis to discuss and strengthen their writing styles.

BENEFITS OF THE SPA

We have observed many benefits of implementing the SPA in these two courses. These are listed in Table 3.

TABLE 3
BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTATION

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1. Reduced student apathy
 2. Improved class attendance
 3. Higher curiosity about content
 4. Improved cooperation among students
 5. Greater involvement of weaker students
 6. Improved attentiveness in class
 7. Better student performance
 8. Great instructor satisfaction
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The most important benefit is that student apathy towards the class is reduced. This is seen in the form of higher levels of motivation as evidenced by their desire to improve their performance in the class. Student attendance is typically at 70 to 90 percent of enrollment throughout the semester.

The main benefit to the instructor is in terms of great personal satisfaction in being able to motivate a diverse, non-homogeneous, apathetic, uninspired group of students to become involved in a semester long journey of learning. There is great joy in observing the excitement that students experience when they excel in academics.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have reported on successful implementation of the Seven Principles in Action (SPA) in two undergraduate business courses. Our experience of implementation in Management Science and Business Writing courses suggest that these principles are applicable to both quantitative and non-quantitative courses. However, our experience demonstrates that each course needs a different implementation strategy because student needs are different. Many student benefits were observed in these two courses as a consequence of use of the SPA. This included reduction of apathy towards academics, improved class attendance, higher curiosity about content, improved cooperation among students, greater involvement of weaker students, improved attentiveness and

better performance. The instructor benefits immensely by having the satisfaction to teach a highly motivated group of students. We find ourselves convinced of the usefulness of the SPA in improving undergraduate education.

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