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USING STUDENT JOURNALS TO ENHANCE LEARNING FROM SIMULATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how student journals can be used to enhance the learning experience of participants in simulations. The philosophy behind student journals is outlined and some guidelines are given for faculty who have not previously used journals as an assessment tool. Finally some student reaction to using journals is provided.

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher of marketing strategy I have always been somewhat frustrated by the relatively limited range of the traditional methods of assessment / evaluation. Typically, these have included case studies, developing marketing plans, preparing industry analyses, etc. While all the previously mentioned methods have very commendable uses. in my view they do very little to encourage the students to reflect on the material covered in class and link that to what is happening in the “real world”.

BACKGROUND

The marketing strategy course in question is a final year course which is part of the Bachelor of Management Studies degree at University of Waikato.

The course is built around two distinct elements, a study of marketing mistakes using Hartley (1995) and participation in a marketing strategy simulation, BRANDMAPS (Chapman 1996).

I was introduced to the idea of journals at a New Zealand Marketing Educators Conference some years ago. Peter November from Victoria University of Wellington, presented a paper on

using journals in his marketing class. Peter talked about wanting students to learn and discuss the discovery process they were going through in his course (see November, 1996).

REFLECTION

The word “reflection” appears frequently in the literature relating to journals. Boud et al (1985) define reflection as “an important human ability in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull over it and evaluate it”. Reflection in education is not new, Dewey (1910) pointed out that all genuine education comes through experience and that reflection can assist in this process.

REFLECTIVE LEARNING AND JOURNALS

Writing has been found to be a useful method for assisting the development of reflective thinking. Batts and Wilkes (1993) believe that the use of journals can bridge the gap between theory and practice and can also assist in the learning process because keeping a journal helps students to write and by writing one learns.

WHAT IS A JOURNAL?

The dictionary definition of “journal” includes “a daily record of occurrences” and “a personal record of experiences and reflections”. It is the latter definition while I wanted to follow not the former.

To break the ice I suggest that in their first entry they should “introduce” themselves (interests, ambitions, etc).

I have found that this fairly straightforward entry gets students to start writing reasonably soon. Areas which I mention are worthy of consideration include:

- what worked and what did not seem to work? Group dynamics. Comments on the marketing mistakes: what would they have done in the situation?
- examples of similar mistakes in New Zealand
- linkages to other courses
- what are they learning.

JOURNALS: SOME OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

Several writers have pointed out that because journal writing is relatively unstructured, students like to know they are on the 'right track'. To achieve and also to counter the "if it's not worth anything why bother?" brigade, the journals are marked about three weeks into the semester but a relatively small weight is attached. Reasonably detailed points are made on the journals which provides direction for the future.

To encourage fairly regular entries, I bring a date stamp to class each week and this provides an opportunity to have journals stamped on a fairly regular basis.

Journals are very interesting to mark. I tell the class that I am looking for evidence of linkages between what they are covering in class discussions, the simulation, what is happening in the world around them, and what they are thinking. As well as linkages I am looking for analytical comments and insights on their decisions and results in BRANDMAPS.

STUDENTS' VIEWS ON JOURNALS

Students were asked to compare journals to other forms of assessment. By a large majority, students reacted very favourably. The learning aspect of journals was mentioned frequently. Most students seemed to enjoy keeping the journal once they overcame the initial challenges. Typical of many comments were "made me more interested in the course and could relate the concepts to the real world".

"Too often in courses students just cram for essay, tests, etc. and end up learning very little. A journal acts as a good tool to get an overall feel of whether or not a student is actually learning anything."

"I have never done a journal before at university. I think they should be part of many more courses, they are a good mechanism for learning more about yourself as well as plotting what you have actually learned and achieved along the way."

CONCLUSION

I have found that journals are an excellent complementary learning and assessment tool when using a simulation. If you believe that academics should be concerned with "learning" and not "teaching" and by definition those of us who use simulations belong to the former, I recommend journals are worthy of serious consideration.

REFERENCES - Available on request