

OUR FAVORITE ASSIGNMENT: THE IN-BASKET ACTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Experience-based learning has become a major component of many university curricula especially in business schools. The development and implementation of an in-basket exercise as a final assessment for an undergraduate Business Communication course is detailed. The nature of various elements of the exercise, their positioning and a research-based rationale for their inclusion is discussed in the context of how to administer such an experience-based learning tool for student assessment. Student feedback on the project suggests a recognition and appreciation of the practical aspects of the exercise. Recommendations on considerations for prospective instructor development and implantation of the project are also offered.

INTRODUCTION

EBL. It has rightfully become a major component of many classes. The question faced by the teaching team of Fundamentals of Business Communication in the College of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh was how to incorporate an experience-based learning component in a class that, of necessity, already involved two sets of peer feedback, learning journals, four presentations, a team report, resumes and cover letters, and written assignments focused on informative, persuasive, and bad news situations. An additional goal was to assure that the EBL element being added would act as a professional portfolio to show to prospective employers. Based on the consulting work of the course coordinator, the answer became development of an “in-basket” exercise that would allow students to synthesize feedback received on initial assignments and demonstrate mastery of various communications pieces in their final project. The result is a comprehensive “half day in the life” of an employee at a fictitious marketing communications agency, BusComm Consulting, that serves as the capstone assignment for the three-credit course.

HOW AND WHY IT FITS

In considering the addition of the in-basket final project, the teaching team was able to look to three streams of research: work focusing on experience-based learning, assessment centers and the in-basket component of assessment centers. Even a cursory review of such work was encouraging because it suggested a sound basis for implementing the portfolio into the Business Communication course

One supporting resource was a 2002 American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business report, *Management Education at Risk*. It notes that “preparation for the rapid pace of business cannot be obtained from textbooks and cases, many of which are outdated before they are published” (AACSB, 2002). In addition, that report calls for “outward-facing curricula and experiential education [that] can create the critical intersection between classroom and business learning that keeps faculty and students connected to rapidly changing business models” (AACSB, 2002). Even so, claim the authors, the curricula of many business schools continue to be dominated more by traditional lecture-based approaches than with problem-based curriculum.

Additional support for this type of assignment dates back much further. Problem-based learning (PBL) finds its roots in Aristotle and ancient Greece. Aristotle said, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” (Bynum & Porter, 2005). What Aristotle is telling us is that experience is a key element in learning, yet one not always incorporated into many courses.

Building on Aristotle’s thinking as well as the concept of learning by experience and the work of Locke, Piaget, Freire, Lewin and others (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2005), David Kolb (1984) developed a model of experience-based learning. Defining experience-based learning as, “the process whereby knowledge is created by the transformation of experience.” (p. 41), Kolb’s model of experience-based learning is characterized by three key elements:

- The involvement of the whole person – intellect, feelings and senses---in learning,

- The recognition and active use of relevant life and learning experience; and
- Continued reflection.

The assessment center, initially implemented at AT&T (Howard, 1974), addresses each of Kolb's elements through its use of multiple assessment techniques. More encouragingly, recent research (Waldman & Korbar, 2004) suggests that the assessment center is consistently predictive of intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of student career success and, as a result, can be used for outcomes assessment.

Looking at the various components of assessment centers, the element that is most logistically feasible is the "in-basket". This aspect was originally developed for military uses in the 1930s. Since then, the high face validity of these exercises has supported its usage in a variety of settings. Though "in-baskets" have modest criterion related validity in general cases, correlations are significant when the exercise is constructed for a specific setting. For that reason, the team understood that there is sufficient evidence to support the development and use of the procedure for various decision-making purposes (Schippmann, Prien, & Katz, 1990). The final determination was that the "in-basket" portfolio is therefore a viable tool for both learning and assessment in a communications course and represents a robust EBL element that is reflective of the business world into which the students will graduate as well as academically supported.

POSITIONING THE ASSIGNMENT

Because most students have never heard of, let alone experienced, any type of assessment center, the assignment begins with a page that describes the uses of such centers as well as the in-basket activity and its purpose. From that point on, students approach the assignment as prospective employees would.

In the business world, applicants would be given approximately three hours to complete the in-basket. That option was discussed by the teaching team. In such an application, the assignment would have been released on Courseweb at a specified time with submission required three hours later. There were, however, two problems with that approach. First, because students would be completing the assignment remotely, it would be possible for proxies to complete the assignment for others. Clearly, that remains an issue in any setting beyond a computer lab. Second, the teaching team wanted the project to also serve as a professional portfolio, demonstrating the best of each student's capabilities. Since students often have trouble finding college assignments that can truly demonstrate real world applications for inclusion in a portfolio, the decision was made to allow students time to craft and perfect their work to better show their strategic insights and attention to detail. One benefit of the non-limited approach is that students who do face an in-basket activity as part of a screening process are better prepared for how to best utilize the time they are given to complete a real life version.

THE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

The material packet begins with a memo from the direct report supervisor for the student's role. In the memo, students find brief descriptions of the deliverables for the project. They are:

- A letter to clients explaining a topic of importance – There are rotating topics for this piece to avoid students submitting work from students in previous semesters.
- A memo report, including executive summary, recommending the selection of preferred vendors for a business service– New home cities are chosen for the project each term so that students must do the online research for themselves. Students are expected to provide the case for the recommendations being made. This allows them to also demonstrate a level of strategic thinking and their analytical skills.
- A PowerPoint presentation to be shown at a meeting during which the recommendations will be presented
- An agenda for the recommendation meeting
- Letters to the two finalists not designated as preferred vendors
- An analysis of expense report discrepancies including a proposed template email to be sent to employees who have violated expense report guidelines
- A cover letter for an internal promotion

Following the memo, students then review various pieces of information presented in random order. They receive:

- A list of the names and web sites for the companies being considered as preferred vendors
- A job description for the internal position for which they are being invited to apply
- A memo packet with a planning matrix and customer comments for consideration in preparing the customer letter. NOTE: This is a distractor item and designed to determine if students can sort through information to determine what is relevant and what is not.
- Corporate expense report guidelines
- Approved hotel reimbursement rates by city
- Approved per diem rates by city
- A memo describing the expense report audit request
- Two pages of expense report entries for review
- Corporate letterhead

SOME ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the introduction of the project, a number of student comments indicate how important it is for students to see corporate materials in the context of day-to-day work. Among the trends noticed by instructors are students commenting that there was a blank sheet of unneeded paper

in the packet (that is the corporate letterhead!) and students frequently assuming the gender of an employee.

Because each element in the portfolio reflects a type of assignment already completed by students, instructors regularly encourage students to review the feedback provided as each assignment is returned to them and incorporate that feedback in the preparation of the appropriate piece in the portfolio while the skill is front of mind. Not surprisingly, students who begin work in a timely manner have little trouble completing it successfully. On the other hand, those who wait until just before the deadline to complete the nine deliverables find themselves stressed and anxious.

Clearly, the portfolio cannot be “corrected” as the instructors correct the earlier assignments for things like spelling and grammar. Instead, for this assignment, instructors play the role of supervisor and return packets to students with comments such as “proofing” or “pattern of organization.” To do otherwise would mean that prospective employers would be assessing the work of the instructor rather than the skills of the student. Providing supervisory-level feedback causes them to analyze information, make corrections and perfect their work in a more realistic, real-world setting. Again, the instructor comments mirror the type of input students will receive when they move to the working world and need to analyze and think through the input they receive then take action to apply it.

CREATING A PORTFOLIO PACKET

Various organizations and the human resources consulting companies with which they work have created in-baskets either as stand-alone activities or as part of a larger assessment center. Those activities are developed to assess the critical competencies for which the organizations screen. At the same time, they utilize behavioral anchors that reflect the top performers in their organizations. The challenge for any university course considering an in-basket project is to make assumptions about competencies and skills of importance to a wide variety of employers. The Pitt project seeks to demonstrate:

- Clarity and conciseness of informative communication
- Building a persuasion case
- Decision-making skills
- Design of communication support materials
- Planning for effective and efficient meetings
- Analysis of numeric information
- Development of boiler-plate language
- Linkage between job requirements and demonstrated skill and experience

All the while, students are expected to organize their information according to researched best practice and to execute correctly and effectively.

As would be expected, the BusComm Consulting in-basket requires substantial time on the part of the instructors to review so many deliverables for each student.

That comes on top of an already busy semester. That is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the instructor is providing supervisory feedback rather than specific corrections. Still, the importance of an EBL experience for students that truly helps them to see what “a morning on the job” might be is incredibly valuable – especially as the course has been transitioned to sophomore-level students. It is encouraging to note that in their journals a number of students have reflected on the fact that the thought of the portfolio project initially panicked them. Frequently, however, students will make comments such as “When I looked at it, though, I realized that each piece was like something I had created before.” And that is exactly what this EBL assignment was intended to be.

Instructors interested in creating a similar project for their students are welcome and encouraged to contact the course coordinator at ckerr@katz.pitt.edu to see if a similar in-basket assignment might be appropriate for their students.

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