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HOW TO HAVE STUDENTS LEARN MORE FROM THEIR TERM PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a course format that exposes students to a process which closely simulates that used in the business world to develop and evaluate projects. The students develop skills and competencies in the areas of report writing, critiquing reports, functioning as constructive evaluators, and incorporating peer input into project reports.

INTRODUCTION

As class sizes increase and the complexity of business topics grows greater, more faculty members are assigning team projects to their students. Generally, the standard format is for students to turn in a finished copy of the project paper and, possibly, give a group presentation to the class. Interaction among the project group members is seen as helping to develop the communication and interpersonal skills that will be required in the real world of business.

If one looks at the project development and evaluation process in the business world, one will, see that the steps used in that standard classroom format for projects only duplicate part of that process and, develop only some of the skills required to successfully deal with this process in a real business environment.

The elements of the business world project report process which appear to be missing from the standard classroom format are: (1) the submission of the draft copy to ones manager/boss and the subsequent revision based on his or her comments; (2) the exposure of ones ideas to other outside the group and the incorporation, modification or tactful rejection of their input.; and (3) the assumption of the role of the outside evaluator of the report who is on the corporate team but not assigned directly to the project team. These three steps require many diverse communication and organizational skills not usually dealt with in the classroom. Different skills are required because the project process shifts from being focused on an individual decision-maker (the instructor and his grading) to a more open, public process within an organization. It becomes a process exposed to decision-makers with diverse intraorganizational interests rather than an exercise aimed at satisfying the standards of the professor.

Each of the missing elements can, to some degree, be incorporated into the classroom project. By changing the timing of assignments, accepting that a good deal of learning will occur on an ad hoc basis, reducing the freedom of choice in project assignments increasing library reserve support and improving the professors ability to role play rather than simply provide facts and correct errors.

COURSE FORMAT

In order to emulate the employee/manager relationship, a draft of the project paper has to be submitted during the early part of the semester. The instructor then provides comments which should raise issues which require investigation, identify sources for further information, point out inconsistencies between the various sections if the paper and express options referred to in the popular literature which may be in conflict with the draft.

The next step is for a second draft to be submitted a week or two after the first draft is returned to the students. A group meeting with the instructor during this period is highly advisable. For some students this will be the final draft but most teams will opt for a third draft after the class presentation. A copy of this second draft of the project report is placed on reserve in the library and the rest of the class is required to read it prior to the presentation of the project in class.

This "public" exposure of the group's work serves several purposes. It obviously creates peer pressure not unlike that which exists in the business world. It also provides the class with the opportunity to become familiar with the project prior to its presentation and permits them to compare its substance and conclusions to their own work and the course readings. An open question format is used during the presentation and students class participation is a significant part of their grades.

The project team at this point has been exposed to the input and opinions of their fellow students and the instructor (who should actively participate in the discussion during the class presentation) The team now has the option to rewrite the paper and incorporate the suggestions offered or develop justifications for their positions which differ from the class input. Rather than require the third version of the paper, I tell the student team what the grade on the project is and the individual grades will be for the project as is. Usually a rewrite will enhance their grade.

For the third element in the project process, the role of outside evaluator of the project, to work it is very important to make clear to the class that their goal is to improve the project not to simply shoot down the presenters. All negative comments must be provided with a suggestion for correcting the problem identified or a statement pointing out new opportunities indicated by any criticism offered. This type of evaluation serves several purposes: it removes the adversarial element from the presenter/class interaction, it creates a win/win situation since the final grade can be improved for the project team and the class participation grade can be helped by the individual's contributions to another teams project.

This approach develops skills needed to provide constructive criticism and to find opportunities where one might only see problems. The students also develop the social skills needed to effectively make their point in a polite context and accept modification of their ideas in the presence of others.

The final reinforcement of the need to develop the skill of critiquing a presentation comes during the final exam. One third of the final exam grade is based on the student's critique of another teams project report. A selection of final reports are provided and the students are asked to select the project other than their own which has the best chance for success as defined in the report and justify their selection. Once again, the emphasis is on the positive. This exercise forces the students to construct a reasoned approach to their evaluation of the projects and has them commit it to writing. The final drafts of the reports are on reserve in the library prior to the final exam. The students know beforehand that this exercise will be part the final exam.