

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 13, 1986

THE COOPERATIVELY-AUTHORED STUDENT HANDBOOK

John W. Newstrom, University of Minnesota-Duluth

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an experiment using student written reports from periodicals and other sources that are then structured, integrated, and typed by the professor into a set of discussion notes for early dissemination back to the class. The time demands on the instructor are heavy, but the potential motivational benefits and contribution to learning may be worth the investment.

INTRODUCTION

An old cliché suggests that “Although there is a book hidden within everyone, most of them should remain hidden.” Is there a book hidden within the collective minds of business students? In particular, can undergraduate business students cooperatively create their own “text” for a course? Some observers might offer a cautious “maybes”, while others would scoff and respond with a resounding “no!” As evidence, the critics could suggest that the writing skills of college graduates have been frequently criticized (by both their new employers and the periodic investigative reports of educational commissions); yet, the optimists might suggest that there may be ways to capitalize on the intellectual capacities of students while compensating for their shortcomings in the communication domain.

Need for a New Approach

This paper reports on an exploratory attempt to overcome five student problems (as perceived by the author): 1) The overall quality of student notes is generally poor. Whether this is a function of poorly-organized and presented lectures, or lack of student motivation and/or skill is unknown. The quality factor becomes blatantly apparent when you look over the shoulder of students in discussion-oriented classes and examine their notes. 2) There seems to be a vast disparity in the quality of class notes across students. The differences in their note-taking skill may be a significant cause of poor vs. good performance on subsequent examinations. 3) Many students express frustration over the difficulty of creating class notes in non-structured learning environments. This frustration may be particularly pervasive when students first encounter discussion-oriented or experientially-based classes. Many walk away believing that they haven’t “learned” anything just because they haven’t yet acquired a large volume of notes! 4) There is considerable (and justifiable) concern in post-secondary education that the vast majority of learning is short-term learning, with a dismayingly rapid decline in retention of knowledge. This is compounded by the high resale rate of used books by students, who rarely retain even the best texts because of the lure of a few dollars. As a consequence, students rarely have a personal

“library” of reference books that they can refer to later (either in subsequent courses, or upon graduation) for refresher on a subject. 5) It is a challenge to get students to regularly immerse themselves in the periodical literature. Even when they do become exposed to it, it is often difficult to stimulate them to relate that information to other topics, or incorporate it into class discussions.

The CASH Approach

In an attempt to overcome these problems, the author devised and implemented a system for creating a Cooperatively-Authored Student Handbook (CASH). The system has now been in use for two consecutive quarters, used in one 4-credit class/quarter with enrollment of about 25 undergraduate students each, which meets for 100 minutes twice/week. The particular class used for the exploratory experiment was a course in Human Resource Development.

At the first class period, (and in the course syllabus), students are told that they will participate in the development of a mini-text for their own course. It will evolve over the duration of the quarter, with the final product estimated to contain as much as 75 pages (8k” x 11”) of single-spaced typed information relevant to the course content as it emerges. They will receive full “co-authorship” credit as contributors.

Their task is to examine the schedule of topics and issues to be addressed in the course, explore the relevant literature (a list of journals with a high probability of containing pertinent articles has been provided to them), and create (for daily submission) a condensation of what they have discovered. The acceptable sources may be books, articles, or even interviews with practitioners from the surrounding area. This material is due at the beginning of each class period. The reports are to address one or more of the following: pros and cons regarding the issue of the day, unique innovations recently introduced, contingency conditions for using a method or system, or a critical evaluation of a practice.

Grading

Students are graded on the quality and quantity of their daily contributions (e.g., up to 15 inputs worth 0, 1, or 2 points each collectively constitute up to 30% of their course grade.) However, there is another thinly-veiled benefit for those students who conscientiously produce high-quality inputs; they can weave their literature discoveries into the subsequent general class discussion of the same topic, thereby qualifying for up to another 30% of their course grade.

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Instructor's Role

The unique nature of the CASH system now begins to emerge (along with a creative but demanding challenge to the professor). The instructor takes the collection of written inputs and screens them for relevance, uniqueness, and coherence. He then combines them with the overall structure and central ingredients of his lecture/notes/thinking on the topic (or essence of the class discussion from that date,) and creates a comprehensive but concise written condensation (2-4 pages) of the information gathered. This has been greatly expedited by the availability of a microcomputer with word-processing capability, generally allowing the creation of each class period's "chapter" in letter-perfect condition within about 2 hours of writing and editing (following the earlier reading/grading). The printed product from that day, with sequentially-numbered pages, is then reproduced by Xerox machine at a cost of less than 2 cents/page, and distributed to all class members at the next class period. (Due to serious departmental budget constraints, students have been assessed \$2.00 each to defray the production costs of the booklet.) To facilitate an aura of professionalism surrounding the project, the university print shop printed covers for the booklet on colored, heavy stock and these were distributed at the first class meeting.

SUBJECTIVE EVALUATION OF CASH

Student Response

Informal feedback directly from students, as well as anonymous assessment of the device via end-of-course questionnaires, indicates that the CASH approach is perceived as a useful product. Students have been particularly impressed by the rapid turnaround (short interval between submission of inputs/class discussion, and their receipt of the collective finished product). They have also expressed pleasure when they discovered that part of what they submitted was actually used by the professor (there is student pride of authorship!).

More significantly, there is a strong feeling of "equal opportunity to succeed on the course examinations when students realize that they all have received a similar set of class "notes" regardless of whether they were present or absent, tired or alert, intrigued or turned off to the day's topic. It also seems (in the mind of the instructor) like students are participating more broadly in the class discussion, listening to each other more intently, and definitely less-actively writing notes. (The reduced level of note-taking only occurs after the first few printed pages have been distributed to the class, and they begin to trust the instructor's ability to provide good notes!). In addition, there is often a sense of surprise among some students when they discover in the printed pages topics that the instructor deemed important that they would have otherwise overlooked. It is also predicted from anecdotal evidence that students are more likely to save the CASH product by virtue of knowing that they helped create it (as well as seeing their name listed on the inside cover as a contributor). It is already clearly documented that students have immersed

themselves in the periodical literature, based on the references for their daily inputs to the handbook. This by itself has proved highly rewarding to the instructor!

Instructor Reaction

The instructor had an initial concern that students would choose to skip a number of classes when word got around that a comprehensive handout would be distributed in each subsequent class period. However, this does not seem to have happened (largely due, most likely, to the weight attached to oral class discussion in the final grading process, or to the embarrassment of needing to contact the instructor after a miss" to obtain a copy of the handout for the previous class session).

Side benefits for this instructor include a renewed awareness of the need to sharpen the focus of each forthcoming class session so students will have the guidance necessary to uncover useful inputs. And, despite the instructor's career-long striving to remain aware of the contemporary literature, it is continually surprising how many relevant items that students uncover that have otherwise been overlooked. It is also believed that the student-professor relationship has improved modestly as a function of the visible evidence students have that the professor actually invests a substantial amount of time and energy into creation of the booklet. (They do empathize with a visible display of hard work')

Costs

Despite its initial success and the benefits discussed above, there are admittedly substantial costs associated with the CASH system. Of greatest self-interest is the time required of the instructor. First, the professor must read and assess the merits of 25-35 daily papers -- a multi-hour challenge. Second, the professor must sort out the information contained therein and synthesize it into a form that is readable by and useful to undergraduate students. Clearly, the challenge can be a formidable one in hours spent if the task is taken seriously.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of "lessons" have been learned thus far, and include the following:

1. Clear topical assignments are extremely important, so that students know what they are looking for.
2. Standards of acceptable quality must be clearly communicated in advance, and applied in the grading of those inputs, so that students feel appropriately rewarded for both their search process and for their coherent presentation of relevant materials.
3. Considerable humility is useful to prevent the written product from becoming nothing more than a typed version of the professor's lecture notes. In fact, this approach is ill-suited for a traditional didactic format, for then it would cease to be perceived as cooperatively authored.

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4. Closely associated with #3, a high level of listening skill is mandated for the professor so that elements of the oral discussion may be picked up, retained, and later incorporated into the printed product.

5. One issue remaining to be resolved is the impact of the "pass-along phenomenon." Specifically, unless the topical assignments are shifted substantially from term to term, any potential user of this approach must confront the possibility (probability?) that new students will obtain both the graded inputs and the printed products from students registered for the course in the previous term.

6. Caution must be used such that neither students nor academic colleagues perceive any degree of impropriety in the process. Of greatest concern are a) the unknowing inclusion and reproduction of copyrighted material that students directly plagiarized, and b) the possible impression that the professor is merely using students as "slaves" to provide raw material for the publication of a book from which the professor might profit.

7. Instructors who intend to use the cooperatively-authored system would probably do well NOT to rely on their memory of the class discussion when they return to their offices, for that can lead to embarrassing omissions and inaccurate reconstructions. At least four alternatives exist to facilitate accurate recall, however: a) write key discussion items on the chalkboard as they evolve, and then stay after class for a few minutes and transfer the key points to notepaper; b) bring along a camera (preferably with instant developing capabilities) and photograph the notes that are on the chalkboard; c) write the discussion items on a flip chart and bring those sheets back to your office; or d) record the major points as the discussion progresses on a blank sheet of transparency film. (Note that each of these alternatives also has the advantage of providing an immediate visual reinforcement to the students, as well as providing a written record for your authoring/editing responsibilities.)

8. Another possibility worth considering is to identify various students to be the student "coordinator of the day," responsible for taking comprehensive notes during the class discussion, screening the written inputs, and creating a rough draft of the chapter for the day (subject to your editing). This would relieve some of the workload from the instructor's shoulders, and provide a broader appreciation among students for the role of the writer/editor in the process.

CONCLUSION

There is an old tale about four persons arguing at the pearly gates about who deserved to get into Heaven first. Each maintained that their occupation was the most important. The architect argued that she created great structures with dramatic appeal that withstood wind and rain and earthquake; the artist argued that he placed great thoughts on canvas for future generations to admire and ponder; the physician now argued that she saved many lives through the miracles of medicine. The professor walked in the gates first, however, when he convinced St. Peter that he had been able to "create order out of chaos, while maintaining his sanity in the process." The analogy here suggests that the experiential classroom can appear chaotic to the students, and even raise penetrating questions in the mind of the professor regarding substantive learning outcomes.

The cooperatively-authored student handbook provides a security net for both instructor and students, allowing one to say, and the others to read, those things which (upon input from the students and reflection by the professor) were deemed most important that day. It allows for the integration of older and newer material, it seeks input from both parties involved, it provides time for digestion and revision of major

thoughts, and it provides a visual reminder for the thoughts expressed in a preceding class period. It seems to hold potential for resolving many of the problems presented earlier: the quality of "student" notes is improved; the disparity among note-takers is removed; the frustration over note-taking should be diminished; a greater opportunity for longer-term reference is available; and reading the periodical literature becomes a near habit (albeit short-term) for students.

Conceptually, the Cooperatively-Authored Student Handbook seems to build most specifically on these key processes for its success: active participation of the students; early, visual reinforcement of the major concepts; and the psychological investment that students have made in the project's success. Although it is clearly not a simulation, game or exercise, it is a relatively unique approach to undergraduate instruction, thereby meriting review and dissemination to others as "an innovation in teaching."