

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 12, 1985

GIVING STUDENTS EXPERIENCE IN TEAM REPORT WRITING

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ABSTRACT

A traditional business communication course always includes a long analytical report. Because in business, long reports are often written by a team or group rather than individually, we experimented with group-written reports. Students assigned to a small group write individual information reports, which are then combined and revised/added to by the group into an analytical report.

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to simulate conditions under which most businesses operate and, at the same time, cut down on the total number of analytical reports to be read by each teacher, we've developed "group report writing" at San Diego State University within the communication in business course.

THE GROUP REPORT SCHEDULE

The group report project involves two stages: a short informational report, in memo form, done individually, and a long, formal analytical report done as part of a team of three to five classmates. The short reports are strictly reports on research, either field (primary) or library (secondary), done in preparation for the long report. Therefore, it is essential that teams be organized and that they mutually agree on the topic they will do their long report on at the very outset of the six-week period that we allot for report writing. (Topic guidelines are included in Exhibit C.)

Team Assignment

Since students don't know one another very well early in the semester, instructors use a questionnaire to help determine the composition of the teams (Exhibit A). We sort these out, primarily by professional interest (i.e. put pre-accounting majors in one team, pre-recreation management majors in another) and secondarily, if possible, by trying to place one person on each team who enjoys a managerial role, one who knows his/her way around the local area, etc. That's usually about as far as we can go in organizing the teams.

Proposed Topics

In the next class period, we ask the various teams to sit in different parts of the room and work out their proposed topics for the long report and to choose coordinators. If time permits, they can also decide who will do what part of the research. We give them, at this time, handouts containing "Requirements" (Exhibit B), "Suggested Topics" (Exhibit C), and "Documentation" (Exhibit D).

By the following class period (or second if they are in trouble selecting a topic) we expect a proposal memo from the various coordinators showing: problem we will help company solve; nature of company; and assigned research area for each team member. These must be okayed by the professor before any research is started. This is a good time

for the orientation-to-school-library trip. Those doing field research must also present their survey instruments for approval. (This helps us avoid their going about asking questions that might embarrass the university and also helps them design useful questionnaires.)

Short Reports

We don't put a grade on the proposals when we okay them. The coordinator receives a "short report" grade based on both the proposal and his/her progress report (due at the end of Week 3). Once the proposal is okayed, the researchers should have seven to ten days to do their short reports and turn them in to their coordinators. The latter should review them for major deficiencies, send them back if more detail is needed, and then present the finished short reports to the professor to grade on style and content. We try to get them in at the end of the third week and back by the middle of the fourth.

Long Reports

The coordinator then meets with the group to outline the long report, determine what still needs to be researched, and assign special jobs, such as graphics, etc. Following that, he/she presents a progress report to the professor. (You can make an outline required or optional, as you wish.) The progress report should be turned in by the early part of Week 5, in order to allow time for additional team meetings if the professor thinks the group has wandered too far from the original plan.

Meanwhile, the coordinator should be getting a rough draft of the report together and should call a brainstorming session to review the draft so that each team member is satisfied with the product. When they have approved, altered, or edited the rough draft, the coordinator is responsible for getting it typed, proofread, assembled, and turned in on time (end of Week 6). We always emphasize that two proofreadings of the typed draft are extremely desirable, and we allow white-outs and neatly inked-in corrections. We also urge them to have it done by a professional typist, but if a member of the team is willing to do the typing (in addition to other assignments, not instead of them) we suggest the rest of the team pay him/her at the going professional rate (about \$1.50 per page).

GROUP REPORT GRADING SYSTEMS

Bonus Points Method

Each member of a team receives the same base grade for the long report, but this would be inherently unfair to those who did most of the work, so we have developed a plan to include "bonus points" (+ or - 20) based on the evaluation form (Exhibit E). Everyone rates the contribution of other team members and the work of the coordinator. The coordinator rates every member of his/her team, but not his/herself. How you weigh or use the evaluations is up to you. It is easy, however, to do it this way: Part I - Disregard the middle

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section, add all the times a student's name appear in either of the other two sections, and subtract one figure from the other (+2 and -1 yields a +1 score, which translates to a 5-point bonus; +4 and -0 would yield a +20 bonus). Part II - Add up all points, divide by the number of team members evaluating, and give two bonus points for each point over 10; subtract two bonus points for each less than 10. Example: J. Smith had a total of 70 credit! from his four team members, or an average of 17.5. That's +7.5 or 15 bonus points.

Group Decision Method

Another way of grading the group report is to require the group to assign points to each member. If the report is worth 150 points, for example, a five-member group is given 750 points ($5 \times 150 = 750$) to distribute among its members. All members must sign the final point division sheet, indicating their agreement.

This method eliminates arguments with you about who did the most work. It also seems to balance the grades better, as the base grade plus bonus point system tends to result in somewhat higher grades.

GROUP REPORTS PROVIDE BUSINESS EXPERIENCE

This method has been developed through trial and error in the fall and spring semesters (1983-1984) and in the fall semester (1984) in 16 classes consisting of average sophomore and junior pre-business and business students. The method used earlier, requiring both short and long reports from each student, placed a nearly impossible grading burden on teachers as class sizes grew each semester.

Castling about for some remedy, we began to look at the true purpose of having students write these reports. First, of course, was to produce a clearly-written report based on their own independent research of a specific business problem. But, in industry, a report of any magnitude is seldom produced by one investigator. In determining the advisability of making an acquisition, for example, a firm such as Anheuser-Busch would send a team of investigators to look at various factors such as market outlook, internal management strategies, accounting, etc. The analytical report recommending acquisition or non-acquisition would be written only on the basis of the informational reports of each separate investigation, combined and weighted by a senior investment analyst.

Learning Teamwork

It occurred to us that we might be giving our students an opportunity to experience that sort of team investigation through the report-writing segment of our business writing course. We began trying out ways of making such an assignment work smoothly and fairly for all concerned.

One thing that has pleased us very much has been the way in which we have seen students learning first-hand how to make a team work. Students are generally go competitive with one another that the idea of working with other students to produce an analytical report was novel and somewhat frightening.

The team approach helps students evaluate themselves in terms of managerial potential. Frequent comments are, "I guess I'm not assertive enough in group situation," or "I soon found out that being Ms. Nice wasn't t going to get the Job done."

In order for this kind of learning to take place, the instructor should be prepared to be--at times-- maddeningly unhelpful. A typical situation might be the following: By the third week it will become obvious to the coordinator that his/her group has at least one nonperformer to deal with. At that point he/she will probably initiate a conversation with the instructor. This is the instructor's clue to back off and say, "How do you think you will handle that problem?" A bit of psychological probing may be suggested, such as, "Do you think 80-and-go feels the rest of the team is getting more attention from you?"

"Was so-and-so's assignment one he/she volunteered for or was it assigned by you?" "Could you break the assignment down into smaller jobs that might give so-and-so more confidence by completing one at a time?" By merely putting forward such questions, the instructor lets the coordinator know that personnel are not robots and management is more than giving orders and adding up the results.

At least one team each semester will have a person drop out. Explain that this happens in business too. The project will still have to be completed on time. Others will have to make up the difference, and that's part of what the bonus points are awarded for.

The students who are most enthusiastic about the new system are, of course, those who get the highest grades. However, a considerable number of those who do not get the grades they had hoped for say, "But I did learn a lot about writing and about working in a group. If I had to do it again, I" Of course, we point out to them that they will have to do it again, many times, both in college and in the "real world."

Some Negative Reactions

Naturally, there are some negative reactions. There are the students who feel "cheated" because "I did 90% of the work, and I only got ten points more than the others."

Some students are "natural loners." These are the ones who most need to learn teamwork, but it is a real hardship to try to force them into the mold. We occasionally let them "opt Out" of the new system, either by transferring to a class still using the individual reports or by making special arrangements. Others for whom special arrangements may be necessary are those who have work (full or part-time) schedules that make meeting their teammate outside of class hours impossible. Allowing a couple of "discussion" hours in the class schedule will usually take care of this problem.

Some faculty find the new system difficult psychologically. It does mean spending more time with "complainers" and you must be prepared to listen sympathetically without taking sides when controversy arises. On the positive side, you get better acquainted with your students earlier in the semester than under the old system. Another plus is that bonuses are assigned by the students. It helps make your grading lean 'subjective'--all you're grading is the written evidence, not the motivation, tire put in, work ethic of the participants, or any other factors.

Academic Advantages

Of course we knew that the group writing system would save grading time. We thought that students would benefit from understanding better how reports are coordinated in business. What we did not anticipate was the improved quality of the reports themselves. Overall, it is our judgment that these team reports

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more closely approximate the 'B' papers than the "C" papers we were accustomed to receive under the traditional, one-student/one-paper system.

On a purely quantitative analysis, it stands to reason that more hours of thought and time are going into each line of the finished product, even though each individual participant may spend less time than he/she would under the old system. Subordinate factors leading to the improvement may be specialization (each team is bound to have someone with a fair knowledge of spelling and punctuation) and competition among class groups. An in-depth psychological study would be needed to determine exactly which factors contribute the most to the overall improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

We've repeated the group report project three semesters now and plan to continue to use it in the future. The advantages:

- students learn group work skills,
- professors have fewer papers to grade, and
- students produce higher quality group reports, seem to outweigh the few negative comments from students and the additional amount of class time it takes to get the project up and running in the beginning. Because the course is a communication course, students improve their communication skills in ways that will apply on the job (a course objective). Teachers grading time is reduced, freeing them to hold more student conferences and develop more research projects.

EXHIBIT A

To help make up teams which will be able to work together well on the LARs it will be helpful if you will fill out this self-evaluation. Use numbers 1 to 5, 1 meaning very little, not much, or not really, 5 meaning very much, a lot, definitely.

- _____ I like to read and work by myself
- _____ I'm good at note-taking (from written sources)
- _____ I'm good at getting people to work under me on projects
- _____ I like working with statistical data
- _____ I think I would enjoy poll-taking
- _____ I'm very time-conscious and never miss deadlines
- _____ I have above-average typing skills
- _____ I print and draw neatly
- _____ I know my way around the San Diego area
- _____ I know my way around the campus and immediate campus area

Please indicate below

- Your name
- Local phone number
- Major in College of Business (Or other)
- Kind of work experience you've had (if any)

EXHIBIT B

REPORT WRITING, INFO 290

You will be writing your long analytical reports (LAR) as teams of three to five members. Each team will choose a coordinator, whose work will be outlined as you read on. The other team members will be responsible for research. Each will write a short, informational report of his/her

research (the "short report") which will fit into the long report or substantially contribute to its completeness.

The first job, then, is to select your team's coordinator and the business problem you wish to analyze. Attached are some suggested topics to stimulate your thinking. You may use one of them or develop your own along similar lines. Either way, your coordinator must write up your topic, explaining the problem, the company (real or hypothetical) for whom you will be preparing the LAR, and your plan of research, showing who is to do what part of the research for the short reports. This is called your Proposal Memo and should be turned in by the next class period. (If it is not approved, you will have to submit a new proposal.) Both field (primary) and library (secondary) research should be included in the short report assignments, since both types must be demonstrated in the long reports.

People who will be doing field research must show me their survey instruments before beginning their research. (I have to certify that the questions you are asking do not violate anyone's human rights.)

Requirements, Short Reports

Memo format, including strong subject line
Length - 1-4 pages, double-spaced
Description of sources (in the text, not as footnotes) and method of research*

The following will help your grade:
neatness, correct spelling and punctuation
subheadings
underlining, itemizing clear examples
concise, precise diction
coherent sentence and paragraph structure with logical transitions

*Though footnotes are not called for in the short reports, they are in the long report. Therefore, I suggest you make sure you copy down all the information you will need for a bibliographic entry when you take notes from any library source. The easiest way is to photocopy any source you think you may use when you come across it. Then you will have the photocopies for the appendix to the long report. If the photocopy doesn't show all the data you need for a bibliographic entry, write it on the back of the photocopy when you make the copy. You may not be able to find the source later.

Team Writing of Long Report

Your short reports must be turned in to your coordinator by the date shown on your Assignment Schedule. Coordinators will review them and give them to me within five days along with the coordinators' comments indicating (a) whether the report fulfills the purpose for which it was intended and (b) was turned in on time. (If a short report seems seriously deficient to the coordinator, he/she should send the reporter back immediately to revise his/her work, since short reports that I receive after the due date will be considered late and graded accordingly.)

When the short reports are returned to you, a class period will be set aside for team planning meetings. At these meetings you should decide whether additional information is needed, who should get it, and how it will be used. This means you should set up a tentative outline of the LAR and deadlines for completion of specific jobs.

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This would indicate that the quote was from the book numbered 1 in the bibliography and came from page 437.

For a long direct quote: Single-space and indent an extra five spaces to set it off from the rest of the double-spaced text. DO NOT use quotation marks too. Use the same type of notation at the end:

----- (1:437-38).
(This notation shows that the quotation came from more than one page.)

For a paraphrase: Many times you will sum up a source's words or ideas rather than quote them directly. Introduce the material with a phrase that identifies the article, book, interviewee, or author: Smith, in his work with Bank of America, found that

End with the notation so your reader will clearly see which material is borrowed:

----- (3).
This notation shows a quote or idea taken from a whole book or interview. If you wanted to show something coming from a whole chapter, you could use (3:ch.5).

Bibliography

1. Alphabetize all sources, including interviews. Number the list. Don't divide by category (book, article, etc.).
2. Indent all lines after the first of each entry three spaces.
3. Single-space each entry; double-space between entries.

How to list a book: Author. Title. Place of publication: Publisher, year. (Note: Put last names first. Periods divide units. Give state if town of publication is not obvious--NY: is all right, but put Homewood, IL: Don't give page numbers.)

How to list an article: Author. 'Title.' Journal Name, Vol. # (Date), pp. (Note: Vol. # is in Arabic numbers only--don't put "Vol." or "No." Put 1-19, not pp. 1-19, unless the magazine doesn't have a volume #.)

How to list an interview: Name, job title. Interview, date.

What if no author is listed? Alphabetize under first word in title; don't use anon. or blank space in list.

How to list a government publication:

Clements, S.D. Minimal Brain Dysfunction in Children (NINDS Monograph No. 3, U.S. Public Health Service Publication No. 1415). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966.

How to list a sales brochure? National Cash Register. NCR2235 (Sales Brochure No. SP-1801, 0577).

How to list your own survey~ Your name. Survey of Date. (Unpublished)

How to list a matters thesis~ Author. Title. Unpublished masters thesis, San Diego State University, 1978.

How to list a newspaper article: Author. "Title." Newspaper, Date, pp. A1; A5. (Note citation of discontinuous pages.)

How to list a lecture: Author. Title. Lecture, American Association of Financial Analysts, September 11, 1978.

EXHIBIT E EVALUATIONS FOR BONUSES

NOTE: Do not evaluate yourself. Do not sign this.

Part I

Do not evaluate your coordinator on this part.

The following members of my team contributed more than a fair share:

The following did the assigned jobs but nothing extra:

The following were uncooperative and, in my opinion, contributed little:

Part II

If you were not a coordinator, please rate your coordinator on a scale of 1 - 4 on the following points: (1) meaning very little, (4) meaning great.

- _____ Organized workload fairly
- _____ Listened to what we were saying
- _____ Was clear in making assignments Kept job moving smoothly at all times
- _____ Was tactful and gave deserved praise

Coordinator's Name: _____