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A PROCESS FOR THE ANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF COURSE CONTENT AND INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY FOR LARGE CLASS SECTIONS

Carol Anderson, Southern Illinois University

Dale Brown, Southern Illinois University

ABSTRACT

Identification of important or problematical course content areas and development of effective instructional methodologies pose particular difficulties in large heterogeneous class sections. A process for accomplishing this task in the undergraduate consumer behavior course, as well as a variety of other courses, is described. Data was gathered from internal and external faculty and students. Within each identified content area key concepts and learning objectives were outlined and a pedagogy developed. A module for a study of attitudes and their influence on consumer behavior is presented to illustrate the implementation of this process.

INTRODUCTION

Effective teaching of large heterogeneous class sections does not come easily in any university subject area. This is particularly true when majors and non-majors alike are required to take a course which is deemed to be irrelevant by many of them. Motivating students to learn content that they do not view as pertinent, and breaking the barriers of selective perception and negative attitudes in the classroom poses a challenge for the enterprising instructor.

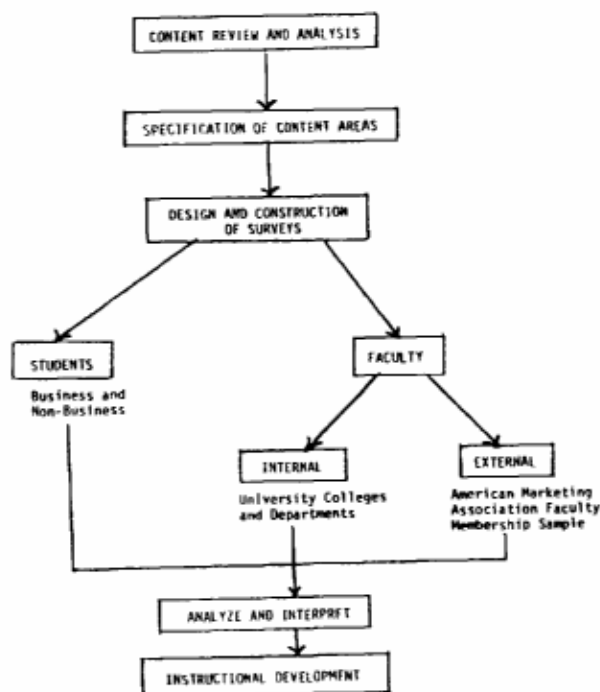
Course content and instructional methodologies must be assessed in light on (1) important subject areas and concepts that should be included from a professional perspective; (2) important subject areas and concepts that should be included from the students' perspective; and (3) effective methodologies for presenting those subject areas and concepts in a large classroom setting.

This paper will share the process and results used by the authors in their attempt to improve methods of determining important content areas to include in an undergraduate consumer behavior course. It also addresses the development and implementation of nontraditional innovative methods of teaching selected content areas to large class sections containing a heterogeneous mix of approximately two hundred students each.

First, discussion will center on the analytical process used to identify important content areas, as well as content that is difficult to teach. This will be followed by a case study of the development and implementation of a module for one topical area identified by the authors using the analytical process described. This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Overview

FIGURE 1
AN ANALYTICAL PROCESS FOR COURSE DEVELOPMENT



ANALYSIS AND IDENTIFICATION OF IMPORTANT
AND/OR DIFFICULT CONTENT AREAS

In order to identify important or problematical content areas to concentrate developmental efforts on in the consumer behavior course, it was first necessary to engage in pre-assessment activities. Formative evaluation provided priority rankings of content areas in terms of relevance, interest, and difficulty. Survey data were obtained from students, colleagues within the authors' university, colleagues at other universities, and instructor and course assessment.

Student input

Over a period of two semesters student profile data were gathered from each section of the consumer behavior class for use in determining course content and in developing instructional strategies. Analysis revealed a heterogeneous mix of predominantly junior level students. Some of the findings which indicated a need for course improvement in order to teach such a diverse audience include: (1) less than nineteen percent

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of the students enrolled in the consumer behavior class were marketing majors; (2) one-third of the class had either no work experience in a business or had worked less than one year; (3) sixty-eight percent of the students enrolled in the class were required to take the course for their respective majors; (4) while nearly three-fourths of the students had a major within the college in one of the business disciplines, including marketing, one-fourth of the students had majors in other non-business areas; and (5) consumer behavior was the first marketing course taken for more than half of the students surveyed.

In addition, students rated broad topical areas included in the course on three dimensions: (1) amount of emphasis students felt they were given in the course; (2) students' interest in the topic; and (3) value of knowledge gained from this topic to students' personal career goals. This information was obtained by student majors to provide more insight into important content areas. Overall, students concurred that broad topical areas that were most interesting and most valuable to them dealt with both personal and business influences on the consumer. Further analysis revealed that these business influences included such topics as product, brand, price, store, and promotion-related concepts. Personal influences included such topics as needs, motives, perception, personality, and attitude concepts.

Faculty Input

Data obtained from faculty internal to the authors' university included responses from each of the business disciplines as to the importance of various topics covered in the undergraduate consumer behavior course to their particular majors. Internal faculty indicated that they would most like to have their majors exposed to several topical areas: consumer behavior theory and models; the purchase decision process; and the study of attitudes.

A mail survey was used to gather data from faculty currently involved in teaching the consumer behavior course at other universities. Three-fourths of the respondents identified a study of attitudes as the most essential topic to be covered in the course and placed heavy emphasis on it in the classroom. More than half of the external faculty felt that a study of consumer behavior theory and models was also essential and placed a heavy emphasis on this area. Additionally, those topics were also rated as the most difficult to teach effectively in the classroom.

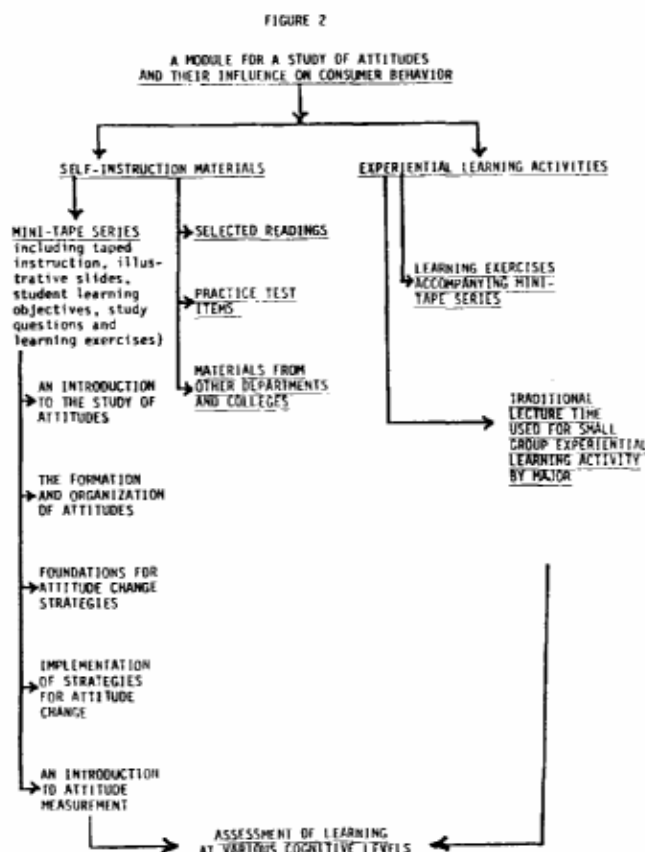
Analysis and interpretation of data from the student and faculty populations indicated several important areas for development of content and instructional strategies. One area deemed essential as well as most difficult to teach effectively is the subject of attitudes. Further, results indicated the importance of business influences on the consumer and consumer behavior theory from the perspective of the various respondents. Therefore, it was determined that a module would be developed for the teaching of attitudes, and that this instructional module would include exposure to important theoretical bases for consumer attitude formation and change, along with pragmatic examples of the relationship between consumer attitudes and the various facets of business influence.

Once the important topical areas had been identified and the key concepts and learning objectives outlined, a pedagogy had to be developed for each of the modules. This methodology is discussed in the next section.

A NON-TRADITIONAL METHODOLOGY FOR TEACHING COURSE CONTENT TO LARGE HETEROGENEOUS CLASS SECTIONS

In the assessment phase of the project information was also obtained from students over the same two semester period which revealed student responses to and preferences for various instructional techniques and media that either were being used, or might be used, in teaching the course. The survey of external faculty teaching the consumer behavior course also addressed the methods used by respondents in teaching the course. Findings indicated, as expected, that lecture was the common approach used by instructors, while students preferred a more individualized approach.

Because of the diverse backgrounds and career objectives of these students, and because of the large class sizes to which they are assigned, a case can be made for the need to use a more non-traditional pedagogic approach to increase student interaction in the learning process and, subsequently, the level of learning that is attained. This was accomplished for the attitudes unit (see Figure 2) through the development and coordination of various innovative techniques such as individualized student modules and improved instructional media to replace the traditional all-lecture approach. The ultimate objective of this effort was to convey and clarify course content by involving students more deeply in the learning process, thereby enabling both marketing and non-marketing majors to apply this knowledge to their specific fields of interest. In addition, test items were reviewed and developed for the assessment of student learning, with emphasis on application of knowledge gained from selected units.



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The task for development of a module for the study of attitudes was three-fold, consisting of the generation of self-instruction materials for use by students in a self-instruction center at the university, experiential learning activities that would enhance learning of concepts through the opportunity to apply knowledge gained to individual student majors, and preparation of test items to be used both for study and assessment purposes.

As those instructors who deal with the concept of attitudes readily realize, the scope of this topic is seemingly inexhaustive. Thus, on the basis of content assessment, major sub-topics were identified for individual treatment within the broader topical area. Self-instruction materials were created in the form of a series of mini-tapes, selected readings to supplement the mini-tapes, and practice test items to be used by the students. The mini-tape series included taped instruction in five areas: (1) An Introduction to the Study of Attitudes; (2) The Formation and Organization of Attitudes; (3) Foundations for Attitude Change Strategies; (4) Implementation of Strategies for Attitude Change; and (5) An Introduction to Attitude Measurement. Each of the tapes was accompanied by illustrative slides, a list of student learning objectives so students would know what to focus on in the tapes, study questions related to the learning objectives, and suggested experiential learning activities that students could implement on their own in order to apply the concepts included in the tapes. Other self-instruction materials included readings which were placed on reserve for students who needed amplification of information provided in the mini-tapes or who wanted to study the topic beyond the requirements of the course. Finally, practice test items were prepared in a slide format for use by students.

In order to accommodate the majority of students who had expressed a desire to meet in smaller class groups for more individualized instruction related to their major fields of interest, experiential learning activities were developed that could be applied to the individual student disciplines. Since the regular class time was freed up by the availability of materials in a self-instruction center, it was possible to use this time for smaller homogeneous groups of approximately fifty students each in order to overcome the impersonal atmosphere of the larger class section.

The first attempt at a more individualized experiential approach in class was relatively flexible in order to provide the students an opportunity for self-expression and to provide the instructor with a better understanding of the needs of the individual student majors who were enrolled in the class. While a number of approaches could be used, such as games and simulations, case development, and others, the method selected was the following: (1) elementary concepts related to attitudes (definition, components, functions, etc.) and attitude change strategies were presented to reinforce what students had learned from the mini-tapes; (2) visual examples of attitude change strategies from current media (advertisements and news articles) in the students' major were presented to the students for their analysis and discussion; and (3) students were divided into groups, using a self-selection procedure, for development of an attitude change strategy for some product, service, or idea within their chosen career areas. (For example, finance majors might have devised a strategy for changing investor attitudes toward N.O.W. accounts or all-saver certificates.) Lastly, students summarized their experiences for the class, and group efforts were related to key attitude concepts introduced at the beginning of the session by the instructor.

Another facet of the development of this module involved the assessment of student learning. To this end, a test bank had been developed and statistically analyzed, with items continually being added. This group of questions was revised as needed and new items were constructed. All questions were put into a pool to be used in several ways.

Some were used for practice test items in a slide format (student views one slide with question on it and tries to answer, then goes to next slide which has the correct answer highlighted). Others were used for assessment of student performance in the class. These questions were developed at several levels: knowledge, comprehension, and application of concepts presented. Particular emphasis was placed on application of concepts learned. Due to the large numbers of students being tested, questions were of necessity written in an objective format--which in itself poses some difficulty in developing valid items for testing.

SOME RECOGNIZED BENEFITS OF THIS PROCESS

The eventual impact of analyzing and developing course content and pedagogy in the manner described is far-reaching. Some of the benefits realized are:

- (1) updating of course content
- (2) providing ancillary materials for more effective instructional use
- (3) providing meaningful individualized instructional materials for students
- (4) providing more experiential learning activities, thus permitting greater student participation and learning
- (5) providing a data base for comparisons of needs and interests
- (6) improving student evaluation of the instructor and the course
- (7) improving public relations efforts among colleagues within the college and the larger university community
- (8) improving the difficulty and discriminability of test items while elevating the level of student performance
- (9) increasing the level of knowledge obtained by students for learning activities
- (10) placing more responsibility on students for learning activities
- (11) providing instructional materials for a content area also related to other disciplines.

While it is still premature to make broad and sweeping generalizations, the efficacy of this process is most encouraging, and may well be beneficial in the treatment of other content areas of instruction in a broad range of disciplines.

Space limitations preclude extensive discussion of all facets of this major educational project. Therefore, a segment of the conference presentation will be devoted to sharing examples of the instructional materials developed, survey results, and the results of formative and summative evaluations of the authors' efforts. In addition, the session will provide an opportunity for audience members to "network" and share ideas on similar efforts.