

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

## THE INTRODUCTORY MANAGEMENT COURSE: TAKING THEORY APPLICATION ONE STEP FURTHER

V. Jean Ramsey, Western Michigan University  
Diane Reed-Mendenhall, Western Michigan University  
Merlene M. Rizzo, Olivet College

### ABSTRACT

Undergraduate students, particularly those with little work experience, have difficulty making the transition from the more abstract concepts found in texts and lectures to the more practical aspects of real-life situations. Case analysis is often used to increase student skills in applying theories to specific situations. A method is proposed which takes the application of theory one step further: students are required to analyze a case analyze their operation in a functioning organization. Experience has shown that this technique helps students to internalize concepts and develop a workable set of skills which they can then use in other situations.

### INTRODUCTION

The introductory course may be the most critical course a student takes in a discipline. It is often a student's first exposure to a field--based on this single experience, students are often either turned on or turned off to an entire area. This problem is magnified in the management field because students often view our material as nothing more than glorified "common sense." How the course is taught may well color their view of the entire field.

Traditionally, introductory management survey courses are taught in a lecture mode. While this is a convenient, and expedient, method to convey large amounts of material, it has little effect on developing skills and attitudes. Undergraduate students, particularly those with little work experience, have difficulty making the transition from the more abstract concepts found in texts and lectures to the more practical aspects of real life situations.

To counteract this, instructors often use case analysis. McMullan and Cahoon [2] feel that cases illustrate nicely the problems involved in applying theory to specific sets of circumstances. There is often no mechanism, however, for transferring this learning from the classroom environment to the world of live application [1]. What is needed is some way to utilize the benefits of case analysis and yet circumvent the problems of students seeing the assignments as empty exercises rather than internalizing the concepts. What we would like to propose is a method which takes the application of theory one step further.

In this method, the traditional case assignment is given which asks students to analyze cases using text material. Students are also provided with a rational problem-solving framework to assist them in their analysis. However, assignments are completed not by individuals, but by groups. These groups function as an organization and apply the text material to their group operation. As a result, students are required to analyze a case analyze their operation in a functioning organization.

There are three projects during the course of the semester, each dealing with various aspects of management, each composed of varying sized groups, and each operating with

different organizational structures. Emphasis is placed on the "doing" (or utilization of management concepts) in a variety of organization sizes and shapes.

### PROJECT I ASSIGNMENTS

#### Analysis

1. All members are assigned to a group composed of 5-7 people depending on class size. Group assignments are made on the basis of major and sex, insuring diversity of membership. One member is selected by the group to act as the manager at the operating level. The remaining members function as subordinates.
2. Assignment is made of an appropriate case, dealing with the material to be covered in the first third of the course. Topics during this period include: introduction to management, evolution of management theory, the role of the manager, environmental impacts, goals and objectives, strategic and tactical planning.
3. Students are required to use a basic analysis format in analyzing the assigned case:
  - a. Determine the facts - The purpose is to systematically summarize the facts.
  - b. Infer from the facts - All such inferences are speculative and may often be tentative or contradictory. They constitute hypotheses or probability statements. Managers must often make decisions and initiate action on the basis of such judgments. These inferences may be a basis for deciding on a course of action later on.
  - c. Define the problem(s) - What managerial objective is being undermined or thwarted? What appears to be the problem may not be the actual problem but rather a symptom of the problem.
  - d. Analyze the Causes - Determine what factors are causing the problem. This should not, however, be a search for villains.
  - e. Develop Alternatives - What actions might be taken to remove the causes and solve the problem?
  - f. Evaluate Alternatives - What are the consequences (pro and con) of each alternative? Determine how well each alternative meets managerial objectives. How much time and organizational resources are required? Costs? Probability of success?
  - g. Select the best alternative - This may be a combination of alternatives. Justify your selection. It involves putting together a systematic rationale for your choice. It should also explicitly state assumptions.

## Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

- h. Recommend a plan of implementation - How will you go about implementing your solution?
  - i. Develop a contingency plan - Using an "if...then" approach, what alternative plan would you suggest?
  - j. Determine generalization to be applied else- where - What ideas can be drawn from this case? Does it emphasize a theoretical concept?
4. Each team member receives the grade that the instructor gives the project multiplied by their percentage of contribution from the evaluation sheet.
  5. In the case of problems within the group, requests for transfers, termination, promotions, and demotions must be documented and made with the know- ledge of the individual involved. Approval for any of the above must come from the instructor; any student has the right to appeal the decision of the supervisor.

### Team Operations

1. The team is required to develop a formal strategic plan for their progress in completing the project, i.e., how are they going to go about accomplishing the Analysis Assignment?
2. Peer Evaluations - The supervisor (operating manager) evaluates each member of the team using a pre-designed evaluation form. The team members all evaluate the manager using a similar Manager Evaluation Form.
3. There are no other constraints except for deadlines for the formal strategic plan, the case analysis, and the peer evaluations.
4. A small amount of class time is sometimes utilized to allow for team meetings. However, it is necessary for the teams to complete the assignment using out-of-class time.
5. Each member of the group receives the grade given to the project by the instructor plus a grade from the results of the peer evaluations.

### PROJECT II ASSIGNMENTS

#### Analysis

1. Groups are reassigned (again using major and sex), separating members of the first project as much as possible. The size of the team is enlarged to 10-13. The second project teams must have a two- level organization with one strategic manager and two operating managers. The remaining members participate as subordinates. Traditional organization structure and hierarchy are used for operations.
2. Assign an appropriate case dealing with material to be covered in the second third of the course. Topics during this period include: decision-making, organizational structure, organizational design.
3. The basic analysis format, outlined in Project I, is used.

#### Team Operations

1. Students design an organization chart which fits the needs of their organization (group). They must define each position, write job descriptions and justify their span of control.
2. Students prepare a PERT program for the operation of their own team showing the critical path for accomplishing the project.
3. Groups turn in an evaluation sheet which assigns a percentage of the grade on the paper to each member based on their contribution to the project. The Percent Evaluation Form must be signed by each team member after the percentage points have been assigned.

### PROJECT III ASSIGNMENTS

#### Analysis

1. Group members are reassigned once again. Depending on the size of the class this is often done by simply dividing the class in half so that each group is usually 15-19 members.
2. The teams must develop an organization with three managerial levels. Groups members select their own vice president, at least two coordinating managers, and a minimum of two operating managers. These individuals may not have participated as managers in previous projects.
3. An appropriate case is assigned dealing with material presented in the last third of the course. Topics during this period include: motivation, satisfaction, leadership, communication, groups, organizational conflict and creativity, and organization change and development, presentation skills.

#### Team Operations

1. This project culminates in a formal oral presentation as well as a written report. The group acts as a consultant group to the other half of the class. When the presentation is given students must dress as if they are presenting their report to an actual organization.
2. Students are required to develop a measurable method of evaluating the performance of each member of the team. These performance appraisals must be signed by the student and their immediate superior.
3. In the case of problems, students follow the same format as discussed in Project II.
4. Students receive a grade on the written analysis, the presentation including actual oral report, visuals, knowledgeability of material, etc., and the evaluation methods.

### PROCESSING OF PROJECT ASSIGNMENTS

#### Informally

The project experience provides many specific examples which can be tapped for class discussion. These are usually raised spontaneously by students as new material is presented and discussed. For example, when the class session concerns theories of leadership, a student may say, "Oh, yeah. Our group manager was task-oriented, when what was needed in this situation was a relationship-oriented leader."

What this gives us is an ongoing "live" example. The instructor must be flexible enough to capitalize on

## Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

these opportunities as they arise throughout the semester.

### Formally

The formal processing of the experiences is done at the end of the third project and is coordinated with the material on groups. At this point, each member of the class is an expert on groups and is very open to discussing the pros and cons of the processes which occurred in the groups. Topics that are raised, discussed, and reinforced usually include:

- Planning
- Controlling
- Performance appraisal
- Group size
- Group development - cohesion
- Task specialization/division of labor
- Informal/formal leadership
- Authority, powers and delegation
- Satisfaction
- Conflict resolution
- Communication - organizational and interpersonal
- Motivation
- Decision making

### CONCLUSION

Our experience has shown that this technique helps students to internalize concepts and develop a workable set of skills which they can then use in other situations. We teach the theory, we get them to apply this theory to specific case situations, but more importantly, we get them to apply the theory to their own actions.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Keys, Bernard, "The Management of Learning for Management Development," Academy of Management Review, Vol. 2, 1977, pp. 289-297.
- [2] McMullan, W. E. and Allan Cahoon, "Integrating Abstract Conceptualizing with Experiential Learning," Academy of Management Review, Vol. 4, 1979, pp. 453-458.