

USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO INTEGRATE THE BUSINESS CURRICULUM

Elaine Payne
Lesley Whittaker
Leeds Metropolitan University

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of the delivery of two integrated, experiential modules on the Business degree at a large Metropolitan university in a major northern city in the UK. The educational benefits of adopting an experiential approach and using a business simulation as a pedagogical method are outlined and discussed. The authors discuss how they attempt to generate a realistic learning environment which is designed to provide students with experience of the competitive world of business organisations. This experience enables students to develop transferable business skills in preparation for employment.

INTRODUCTION

The essence of a business education is to produce graduates who are able to work effectively and successfully in a range of organisations throughout the world as well as the fundamental imperative of intellectual and academic development. Many business graduates will find themselves in management roles dealing with the problems faced every day by organisations. One of the keys to a successful management career is to be able to apply conceptual knowledge to the effective solution of organisational problems. In order to prepare graduates for a career in the business world business schools must ensure that students not only have the appropriate knowledge, but are also able to develop the skills to refresh that knowledge (learning) and apply their knowledge to solve problems. Business schools are well equipped to deliver appropriate knowledge but arguably not necessarily in a manner befitting preparation for working in organisations of the 21st century. This in turn limits the opportunities to allow students to practice applying the knowledge gained in the solution of problems. This paper presents a case study of how a business simulation has been used within the curriculum to address these issues.

PRESENTATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Traditionally in business schools knowledge is presented in compartments reflecting the way in which business schools are organised and managed. Business faculties are normally organised into functional departments or schools - marketing, HRM, finance etc. - under the

assumption that business education is best delivered by dividing the efforts of academic staff according to their particular specialism. Whilst this may satisfy efficiency and enable straightforward performance and quality targets to be easily met, it no longer reflects the way in which modern businesses operate or are managed. Walker and Black (2000) suggest that important changes in the environment that business organisations have had to respond to include:

- The development of a consumer led society in which customers are demanding variety, change, and speed
- A substitution of knowledge for capital
- A global economy
- The need for both organisations and individuals to have 'complete competence' in a broad sense

This has led to businesses implementing organisational change to become more flexible, customer oriented enterprises. One of the consequences of this has been a trend towards flatter organisational structures arranged around processes rather than functions. The shifting nature of work, with an evident move towards more ownership of the work processes means that employers no longer want graduates with only specific functional skills and knowledge. They require flexible and adaptable employees who not only possess knowledge that is current, but also the skills to update that knowledge on a regular basis.

Many UK Higher Education institutions have implemented new technologies to re-engineer their learning, teaching and assessment processes - some successfully (though UK eUniversities, a UK government backed, public-private, eLearning initiative offering high quality, online degrees from UK universities to students globally, was formally disbanded in July 2004) - and are acknowledging that education is now a global market place - though whether this is because of the attraction of supplementing a dwindling unit of resource with lucrative overseas fees or a genuine desire to compete in a global market place is debatable. However, many have failed to address the traditional Smithsonian organisational structure of functional silos. Whilst current UK HE business school organisational structures produce competent accountants, financiers, marketers, HRM professionals etc., this functional structure may not be conducive to producing good all-round business graduates.

The compartmentalisation of staff can lead to a Balkanisation of the curriculum (there have been many conflicts over boundaries, beliefs and history in the Balkans) with a dearth of interdisciplinary courses and an

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inability to respond to a market place requiring flexibility and customer responsiveness. Programmes of study are divided into modules/courses neatly fitting into the functional silos - but easy to teach and assess and importantly resource. Staff are on familiar territory supported by their specialist knowledge and often try to build barriers around their specialisms. This leads to a distinct lack of interdisciplinary core modules that enable students to take a holistic approach to the study of business organisations.

Many business courses have a 'capstone' module of business strategy in the final year but arguably this is too late - students should have an integrated understanding of how businesses function from an organisational rather than a functional perspective (Walker and Black, 2000). It would be more realistic to present business organisations to students as integrated activities earlier in the curriculum, rather than as discrete specialisms. This would not preclude students specialising as well - but for example, marketing, accounting and HRM specialists need to understand the integrative nature of business organisations in order to perform effectively in their professional role.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Harris and Schwann (1991) (cited in Gopinath and Sawyer, 1999) suggest there are three ways in which learning may be viewed depending on where the emphasis lies:

- Learning as a product - for which the emphasis is on the end result of the learning experience.
- Learning as a process - for which the emphasis is on what happens during the course of the learning experience in attaining the given product or outcome
- Learning as a function - for which the emphasis is on some of the critical aspects of learning, such as motivation, retention, and transfer, which make behavioural changes in human learning possible.

If we take the view that learning is a process, there are two ways in which students may engage in the process - passively or actively. Passive learning may be appropriate for those disciplines where a broad range of facts need to be learned. In this case the tutor acts as a bank of knowledge that is transmitted to the student as passive receiver to ensure all students have the basic knowledge and understanding of the fundamental concepts. However it can be argued that this is not sufficient for students of business. Whilst theoretical knowledge of business disciplines is important, content without experience is of little help to business organisations. The challenge for business schools is therefore to produce business graduates who are able to perform effectively in dynamic and complex business environments. This means that much of the business curriculum should engage the student actively in the learning process to prepare them for the business world. Business is an area where learning must be acquired through experience (active learning) as it involves achieving a

dynamic balance between business variables such as sales, production, competitors, employees, cash flow etc to ensure the effective and efficient operation of the business.

Kolb (1984) propounds the idea that experiential learning is a process from which concepts are interrogated and continuously modified through experience. These iterations progress the learner to the higher levels of learning. He goes on to suggest that those involved in an experiential learning exercise must be able to:

- involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences;
- observe and reflect on these experiences from many perspectives;
- create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories;
- use these theories to experiment, make decisions and solve problems

Gopinath (1999) suggests that this emphasises that "learning requires both a perception of experience and its transformation into action." p479. Learners should, therefore progress around the Kolb model in a systematic way.

The design of study programmes in the UK are now influenced by the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (QAA, 2001) which outlines the requirements for students at each level of HE study in order to ensure a consistent use of qualification titles. In tandem with this, various educational taxonomies are used e.g. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of intellectual/learning domains. By the final year of undergraduate studies students should be well versed in the use of the higher level intellectual skills of analysis, application, synthesis and evaluation.

Feinstein et al (cited in Feinstein, Mann and Corsun, 2002) conducted an empirical study in which the findings demonstrate that experiential learning facilitates the ability to use higher order cognitive skills to solve problems and take decisions. The challenge for business schools in delivering the business curriculum is therefore to ensure that students have opportunities to:

- Take a holistic approach to the study of organisations
- Participate in experiential learning activities
- Develop and practice higher order intellectual skills

Walker and Black (2000) articulate the three dimensions of a process managed core business curriculum:

- Knowledge of disciplines (accounting, finance, marketing, operations etc.)
- Skills (communication, computer literacy, critical thinking etc.)
- An integrative theme (business processes such as business strategy, information systems, change management, business environment etc)

SIMULATIONS

Simulations can offer an effective way of teaching the business curriculum - providing an authentic, vicarious

experiential learning environment, whilst enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge and reflect on learning in the style of the Kolb model. Simulations model some complex processes that reflect reality but also require active engagement in the learning process by participants. In an educational setting business simulations have the potential as a pedagogic tool to effectively achieve the objectives of presenting the curriculum in an integrative way and allowing students to develop the skills required to solve business problems.

According to Gredler (1992) the key characteristics of simulations are:

- Specific issue i.e. a problem or policy that precipitates a variety of actions by the participants
- The setting and issues are not textbook problems or questions for which answers are cut and dried or determined quickly
- Roles are defined that interact with the posed problem or issue in particular ways. Participants address issues and problems seriously and conscientiously in a professional manner reflecting reality
- Outcomes are the consequence of actions and are not determined by chance or luck.

In addition participants should encounter the consequence of actions as decisions are made in the execution of the role. Operating in a dynamic environment, participants can observe the impact or interactions of their decisions with external and competitor variables.

The iterative process of simulations promotes learner activity through experiential learning, empowers participants in the learning process and encourages interaction with others, which leads to deep learning. Students' involvement and interest are aroused whilst participation in learning activities increases motivation and, because the tasks undertaken are realistic, meaningful learning occurs.

However simulations are not an easy option in delivering the curriculum. For simulations to be successful as an academic exercise the following factors need to be considered:

- The simulation needs to have some academic underpinning and the relationship with the rest of the curriculum needs to be evident.
- There needs to be meaningful outcomes set for the exercise
- Assessment needs to focus on the process as well as the product
- A post simulation activity is desirable to draw out significant learning
- Tutors act as facilitators rather than adopting a traditional tutor role.

CASE STUDY

The Leeds Business School at Leeds Metropolitan University is one of the largest in the post 1992 university sector in the UK. It currently has over 5500 students registered on a variety of undergraduate and post graduate awards. Leeds Business School aims to contribute to the university's vision to be a world class regional university by delivering high quality courses which are attractive to both regional and world wide communities in what is increasingly a globalised world.

The Business School is structured in a fairly traditional way with 5 schools: Accounting and Finance, Human Resource Management, International Business and Strategy, Marketing and PR and Law. These schools are the focus of subject/discipline development but the Faculty is currently undergoing a review of all the undergraduate programmes that is providing an opportunity to develop the curriculum and move towards greater integration. The removal of programmes from school ownership should encourage this development.

The philosophy underpinning both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the Business School is one of progressive problem solving. Undergraduate students are initially presented with well defined, closed problems often with straightforward solutions to facilitate the development of knowledge and skills. At level 2 students are presented with more complex problems, some of which integrate the functional areas of business so students can appreciate that decisions taken affect other parts of the organisation and where the solution is less clear cut. By level 3 students face completely open ended problems in that they are tasked to find their own projects in companies, carry out research and ultimately provide a solution that is acceptable to the organisation whilst meeting the academic requirements of the course. As students progress through the levels of study increasingly open ended, more complex problems are used to enable students to understand that there is no 'one best way' or 'right' way of doing things. The progressive nature of this approach encourages students to work collaboratively as they progress through a continuum from dependence, through interdependence to become increasingly independent. This type of progress towards the learner learning for himself or herself with appropriate pedagogic support is termed 'scaffolding' by Athanassiou, McNett and Harvey (2003).

There has been considerable debate in academic and other communities about 'graduateness' and the need for students to possess not only academic knowledge but transferable skills at graduation that prepare them for the business world (Harvey, 1993, 1997, AGR, 1995, Drew 1998, Brown 1998). The two undergraduate modules that are the focus of this research have been structured to embrace both academic content and skills development and to equip students with the skills that employers want. The modules attempt to provide a stimulating learning environment in which academic knowledge is presented

Semester 1	←	→	Module 3	Module 4	Module 5
Semester 2	Integrative Business Simulation	Business Skills 2	Module 6	Module 7	Module 8

Figure 1 Year Two Course structure

integratively. Students are able to apply this knowledge to the solution of business problems whilst at the same time enhancing their skills and experiences.

THE MODULES

The focus of this case study is the development of two modules/courses for level 2 of a general business programme which use a business simulation to integrate subject knowledge, theoretical approaches and practical application in an organisational setting. The two modules attempt to provide a realistic experience of the operation of business as well as the acquisition of the interpersonal skills identified in the 'graduateness' debate.

The Integrative Business Simulation (IBS) and Business Skills 2 (BS2) modules are part of the second year undergraduate business programme and over 200 students study the modules during each academic year. Unlike other modules within the programme, these modules are delivered over both semesters of the academic year. (See Figure 1 for second year course structure) The approach adopted in the modules enables students to develop ideas and insights to reach decisions that satisfy the particular circumstances encountered in the modules. Valuable experience is gained in thinking creatively, solving problems and making decisions in a group environment, which is important for the rapidly changing business world in which students expect to work. Independent learning skills are developed and students are able to organise their own learning experiences for maximum benefit. This creates mindsets that are conducive to lifelong learning.

The two modules are integrated with delivery structured so that Business Skills 2 academic content is delivered followed by academic content for the Integrative Business Simulation module in semester 1 before students work independently. It appears that the delivery is seamless because frequently the students tend not to differentiate between the two modules.

INTEGRATIVE BUSINESS SIMULATION – THE 'EXECUTIVE' BUSINESS SIMULATION

The Integrative Business Simulation (IBS) module uses the 'Executive'ⁱ simulation based on the European car market. This simulates the operation of a vehicle manufacturer over several years. Students are first introduced to group theories and models and are allocated to

teams by tutors using the Belbin 'e-Interplace'ⁱⁱ software. Each team then takes on the role of a Board of Directors of a car manufacturing company with the simulation allowing them to operate in a competitive environment to produce and sell vehicles for the European Car Market.

Students make decisions on a range of variables such as product design, market sectors, finance, human resources, salaries, production etc. As the module progresses teams have to consider the results for their company and their competitors and analyse their performance as a result of the decisions taken in order to determine appropriate strategies for the future and submit further decisions. Each decision is a simulated year of operation of the business and the 'Executive' simulation produces reports at the end of each simulated 'year'. The culmination of the module is an Annual General Meeting at which the 'Board of Directors' present the company's performance to shareholders (i.e. other student teams) who question the Board about any aspect of the company's performance.

The academic content of the IBS module draws on a number of disciplines, providing opportunities for students to appreciate the importance of each of the functional areas, the interaction between them and thus the complexities of business. The module facilitates synthesis and assimilation of knowledge, encouraging students to take a holistic and integrated view of the operation of business and allowing them to engage in the integrative nature of business in a low risk environment.

Student learning results from research into vehicle manufacturing industry, group discussion about company results, experimentation and negotiation in determining strategy for their company and dealing with operational issues. This encourages the development of learning skills that are generic and transferable rather than learning subject specific facts. The rationale for this is that knowledge has a limited life. The business simulation also provides students with the opportunity to develop skills in dealing with complex inter-related business problems, uncertainty and risk. For example, if teams take an ill-considered decision, this may have unintended consequences such as strikes, large stock holding costs etc.

By using a simulation the students have opportunity to apply academic knowledge gained in other, more traditional modules, to the realities of running a business organisation. This accurately reflects the business world in that decisions made will affect whether, for example the company is

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profitable, or not, has good/poor industrial relations, increasing/falling market share etc.

BUSINESS SKILLS 2

The Business Skills 2 (BS2) module is integrated with the Integrative Business Simulation (IBS) module in order to provide students with the opportunity to practice and develop business related skills in context. The skills developed in the BS2 module are those highlighted by employers as necessary in the workplace of the 21st century, for example leadership, communication, decision making, problem-solving, group working, meeting skills and career development, with a focus on the development of transferable interpersonal skills essential for competent performance.

At the beginning of the module students complete a Business Skills checklist in which they are asked to analyse the development of their skills after their first year of study on the programme. Students are directed to the Skills for Learning¹ site on the University Intranet for information about team working, meeting, problem solving and employability skills. The module encourages students to engage in reflective practice in that students learn from 'doing', through interaction with others and subsequently reflecting on this and their behaviour with the objective of improved performance. Students reflect in action (Schön 1983, Moon 2000) about events that they experience during the modules and compare their behaviour to theoretical approaches with the intention to enhance performance and/or build a repertoire of available behaviours for future action. This is a cyclical process, based on the Kolb learning cycle (1984 in Osland, Kolb and Rubin, 2001).

The purpose of reflection is to encourage students to think about the consequences of their behaviour and that of the others in their team. If, for example, there are mismatches of perception and/or unexpected responses from others, students can reflect about the situation, check out their perspective with others if they wish, and become more knowledgeable about themselves and others for future decision-making and workplace behaviour. Students are advised to keep a diary of experiences for the duration of the module in order to complete a reflective assessment and explore individual learning. By keeping a diary, students have to go beyond just thinking about an issue, but have to articulate it, and then reflect on major themes to explore in the reflective assessment. Whilst this may not lead to a resolution of an issue, students are likely to have a better understanding of it.

To aid reflection students appraise the performance of the team members on a weekly basis and provide feedback. This is an ongoing process throughout the first semester. The appraisal process draws on guidelines from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), a UK government sponsored organisation. The appraisal process requires teams to appraise: attendance/participation;

volume/quality of work; knowledge/skills; dependability; commitment; communication and team working.

It is unlikely that students will become 'expert' reflective practitioners during one academic year, but it is expected that they will take more responsibility for their own development and that of their peers. This is good preparation for Continuous Professional Development which is increasingly a requirement of the professions in the UK.

PROGRAMME/DELIVERY

The delivery of the modules has moved away significantly from the traditional, didactic approach and provides an interactive independent learning environment where students take responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers. This encourages non-competitive interaction as students experience, reflect and develop as individuals and as a learning community. The modules are designed to promote collaboration and independence in learning using the problem solving philosophy. The two modules are integrated in their delivery and use a variety of techniques including:

- a) Signpost lectures at the beginning of the programme to introduce students to the learning/teaching methodology, teamwork, business planning and analysis, the 'Executive' simulation and career planning.
 - An extra dimension is added to the lectures by inviting 'experts' in the industry to deliver.
- b) Computer assisted learning through the LMU Intranet site 'Skills for Learning'
- c) Independent, collaborative learning through small group work

It is expected that students will act in role as directors of a motor manufacturing company at their weekly meetings. No other limitations are placed on team meetings outside of this framework, teams may meet as often as they choose to discuss strategy, carry out appraisals, build and develop the team. It is the students' responsibility to organise meetings and decide who will play each role in the company. Tutors do not monitor the groups beyond acting as facilitators, consultants and mentors, and students are encouraged to resolve problems and difficulties encountered within the team, whether these are participation, motivational or conflict etc.

The independent learning approach encourages both students and tutors to consider the role of the tutor, the nature of the learner and the authority of knowledge. It is more demanding of the learner and presents a challenge, particularly to those students who are more accustomed to the traditional tutor led teaching and who may resist a more active approach to learning. The traditional didactic approach of lectures and tutorials can be comforting to both tutor and student with authority residing with the tutor. The independent approach slowly shifts control from the tutor towards the students. As the modules progress, tutors hand over some of their traditional authority to the students and

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take on the role of facilitators of learning, consultants, mentors and coaches rather than 'expert'. However, it is important to recognise that the tutor still has the responsibility to reassert his or her authority if issues arise which are unable to be resolved through facilitation.

The model below (Figure 2) provides the framework for how these modules have been developed:

In organisations teams tend not to be self-selecting, but are formed by management. To reflect this, within the first few weeks of the modules, tutors assign students to mixed teams of six or seven members thus providing a diversity of knowledge and experience. This approach ensures that teams are not made up of friends and that groups undertake the project from the same starting point, as they all have to

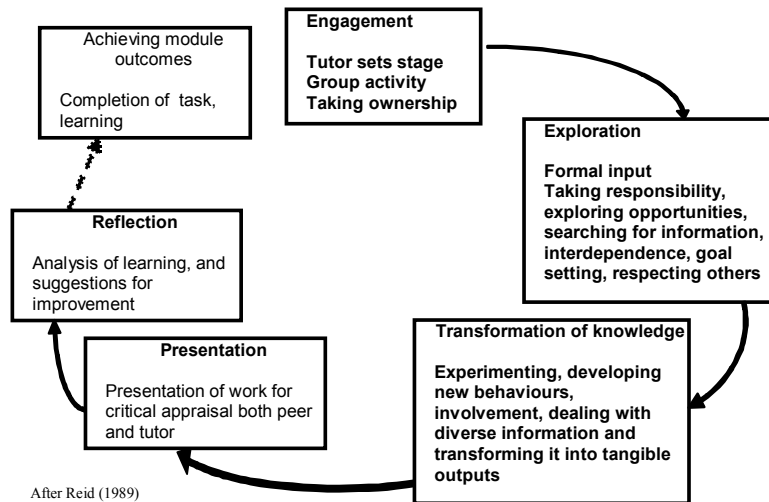


FIGURE 2
STAGE 1 - ENGAGEMENT - TEAM FORMATION AND ANALYSIS

Belbin's team role theory (1981, 1993) and the 'e-Interplace' software are used to provide students with a framework to diagnose/develop an effective team. At the introductory seminar students complete Belbin's Team Role Inventory and subsequently enter their responses on to the Belbin website. After analysis by the software, feedback is provided to students in the form of a Self-perception profile, a Character profile and a Counselling profile. This indicates to students which team roles they 'play' naturally, they could adopt if necessary, or should avoid and provides an in depth profile of their strengths and weaknesses. The lecture programme covers topics such as: Belbin's Team Role Theory; Johari Window; effective teams and a viewing of the video 'Building the Perfect Team'^{iv} which outlines in brief the team roles and shows Team Role Theory in action at a dramatised company.

Students are also encouraged to think about career planning, in particular about the skills they are developing which will be of use to them in their chosen career. As part of the assessment students have to complete a Curriculum Vitae (Resume) which they can use if they are applying to employers for a 48 week employment placement, or alternatively it is preparation for applying for employment during the final year.

begin the process of team formation and development. Once formed, teams are not changed but remain in existence for the entire academic year.

When the group composition has been determined, teams are provided with one Team Role Combinations Report (also from the Belbin e-Interplace software) that provides advice about which team role each team member should adopt. In their first meeting as a Board of Directors the teams are asked to consider the strengths and limitations of their team based on Belbin's team role theory. This enables teams to develop strategies to overcome any deficiencies that might have a detrimental effect on how they work together.

STAGE 2 – EXPLORATION – RESEARCH

The modules are underpinned by the belief that learning should be a process of independent exploration and discovery. Whilst certain resource information is provided to students by tutors, teams must explore the opportunities presented to them, and through exploration and discussion they take ownership of the material.

Once in their teams, the students are set their first task as a Board of Directors - to produce a business plan for the operation of their company. In order to do this, teams must

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research the European car market, and based on this research, make decisions about market sectors, production, pricing and a wide variety of other factors that are involved in the operation of the business. The business librarian at the University provides introductory sessions detailing the resources available and ways of retrieving information about the European car market.

In addition sessions on group work in the BS2 module encourage students to work independently and collaboratively, contributing to the development of others, valuing and respecting all team members whilst examining, analysing and interpreting how the team operates. This enables teams to build self-knowledge as well as to understand and gain insights into individual and team behaviour and to change or practise new behaviour in a 'safe' environment. Teams are also advised to reflect on their experiences whilst at the same time attempting to change behaviours that are not effective, or counter productive. At this stage a psychological contract develops between students within a team, and there is peer pressure to attend because the other students in their team expect attendance.

STAGE 3 - TRANSFORMATION OF KNOWLEDGE – RUNNING THE COMPANY

Once the business plan is completed, the IBS module requires teams to make decisions about their company. Students have to research, analyse and interpret complex situations against a deadline. The weekly board meetings provide an arena for the team to discuss their company's results and performance, as well as an opportunity to appraise the performance of individuals. Teams are encouraged to share responsibility, support and encourage each other in presenting their individual interpretations of their company's performance in striving to achieve a common understanding of the issues facing their company. This allows the team to deal with process issues as well as achieving the task of running their company.

Accuracy is also an important variable and teams are advised that any errors on the decision form that they submit for each simulated year will be entered into the Executive simulation programme. When errors are made, students are quick to blame tutors, though the 'evidence' of the form usually demonstrates that teams were not as accurate as they thought! All team members sign the form to indicate their agreement with the decision, which overcomes the problems of one team member making the decision on their own, and/or team members dissociating themselves with major blunders.

During the semesters, the tutors act as facilitators and consultants at the board meetings. Teams are advised that tutors will drop in to the Board meetings without prior warning and all teams are expected to be in the tutorial rooms at some point during the scheduled sessions. Sometimes, it may be necessary for tutors to clarify tasks, prompt discussion, question appropriately and act in the role

of supervisor, evaluator or supporter depending on the current phase of team learning. This type of tutor interaction is much more personal and informal, facilitating dialogue rather than the didactic approach of the traditional lecture format. However, there are also occasions when the tutor needs to act as a mediator as a last resort, but the authors have found that this is a rare occurrence.

Teams organise and structure their meetings, which enables them to learn and reflect upon their mistakes as much as their successes, without the close scrutiny of the tutor at all times. Students are encouraged in the BS2 module to access the various inventories on the Intranet to check out perceptions, assumptions and judgements and to share learning so that the whole team benefits through a process of genuine self-evaluation and personal responsibility. The inventories require teams to focus on observation of interactions, participation as an individual, appraisal of each team member and reflection about behaviour retrospectively in order to explain and understand what happened in the team setting. Learning independently makes each team member a stronger individual in their own right, for example by having to solve problems, help each other, checking understanding and reflecting upon learning. This facilitates increased individual competency, provides opportunities to take responsibility for learning and augments students' knowledge of the consequences of behaviour.

In addition to dealing with the process issues, teams have to be sure that the various tasks are scheduled and dealt with during their meetings. As the modules progress, teams have to focus on an increasing amount of preparation for board meetings where strategies are determined and appropriate courses of actions planned. In order to do this teams must draw on knowledge and skills from a range of subject areas. After the first Board meeting, the teams are asked to provide the tutors with agendas indicating the date and time of subsequent meetings, and minutes of all meetings via email. The role of Chair and secretary of the meeting is rotated among team members, so each person is able to assess themselves and others in these roles.

Students learn from each other, acknowledging and dealing with diversity, influence and many other aspects of group work. They must identify and accept (or change) their role in the social structure of the team in completing the tasks set articulating, presenting and justifying their own viewpoints and in the final analysis the team has to answer searching questions from their peers acting as shareholders.

STAGE 4 – PRESENTATION

There are a number of opportunities for students to present the results of their work and to receive feedback and these include:

- the business plan
- board meetings - students are encouraged to present their analyses and thoughts about the company's performance to their team members. Full discussions within the team

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result in decisions being made about the future direction of their company. The process of presenting their views and engaging in intellectual negotiation to solve problems consolidates student learning.

- the Annual General Meeting -The culmination of the modules is an Annual General Meeting for each company with other teams and tutors acting as shareholders. At the AGM the Board of Directors completes a presentation about the performance of their company and then opens the floor to questions from the shareholders. The presentations are generally quite sophisticated and all teams use PowerPoint presentations and provide appropriate annual reports for their shareholders. The shareholders (other teams in the same 'world') generally ask penetrating questions of their peers and often have done a quite detailed analysis of the other company's results. By the time of the AGM, the teams have usually developed into tightly knit social networks and the support offered within the team is evident.
- Analysis of the team. The team present an analysis of their team using Belbin's Team Role theory, other theories/models introduced in the module and the appraisal documentation as evidence

STAGE 5 - REFLECTION

The Business Skills 2 module requires students to reflect upon their learning experience using various diagnostic instruments and guides team members towards analysing both individual and group processes with a view to continuous improvement. The principles of reflective practice have a long history (Schön, 1983, 1987, Moon, 1999), and require students to engage in a piece of enduring work that will develop self-awareness in a purposeful manner. This analysis is underpinned by the appraisal process, the peer assessment process and the theories/models introduced in the BS2 module. The appraisals and peer assessment are conducted over several months and therefore the reflective assessment tracks learning.

Group working provides students with many opportunities to explore interpersonal issues and to develop explanations for behaviour, as well as monitoring progress made in dealing with them. Students can reflect about conflict situations, which seem to be inevitable, though sometimes teams do not wish to acknowledge conflict to tutors. Such reflection is desirable to develop the skills for dealing with confrontation. Students also develop trust and communication skills through discourse about problems encountered, for example with different work styles, personality types etc and how to accommodate these differences in the attempt to reach a common goal. Major advances can be made in skills development if students are prepared to use the appraisal process and the peer assessment as a learning opportunity. Teams are also able

to reflect about the causes and consequences of behaviour over time which maximises the learning benefits

Reflective assessments normally develop insight, critical thinking and improve the quality of the learning experience by enabling students to be more sensitive to the events that they encounter. Because the team chooses the incidents to reflect upon, this encourages ownership as well as an immediate applicability to any learning drawn from the reflection.

ASSESSMENT

The independent learning environment provides a framework for the learning outcomes of the modules to be assessed. Whilst separately the individual module assessments have a symbiotic relationship.

Students are assessed in the modules using a combination of individual performance in the form of a group reflective assignment for BS2, a business plan, group presentation and peer evaluation for IBS.

The first collaborative task the team must undertake is the completion of a business plan for their company. This part of the assessment is 50% of the overall assessment for the IBS module. One grade is given by the tutors for each business plan and each member of the group is awarded that mark.

The authors agree with the view presented by Gosen and Washbush (2004) that team performance in a simulation is not a proxy for learning. The second part of the assessment does not therefore use company performance as a measure of students learning but is based on the decision making of the group, their presentation at their Annual General Meeting and the questions posed as shareholders. The quality of decision-making may result in improved team performance. Arguably, teams that perform badly initially invariably learn more as they try to turn their fortunes around. Teams that feel they have 'hit a winning formula' can become complacent in their decision-making. Throughout the modules students are encouraged to help each other to learn without the presence of a tutor. A natural conclusion to this is for the students to be involved in the grading process i.e. peer assessment. Whilst the grade for the presentation is awarded by the tutors the distribution of the marks within the team is determined by peer evaluation which is ongoing during the second semester.

Throughout the second semester teams must discuss each individual team member's progress at their board meetings. This provides an opportunity for individual members to assess their own and others' performance and negotiate tasks accordingly. Since the introduction of peer assessment, the students do not complain about 'free riders' but use the peer assessment to distinguish between those who have worked hard and those who have not. Before the final grade is announced, teams must also sign to accept the allocation of marks determined by the team according to the criteria in the initial agreement and the discussions at Board meetings. Individual student marks can move up or down

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according to the weight assigned by the team through peer assessment.

The assessment for the BS2 module is a group reflective assignment for which a team mark is awarded by the tutors. An individual mark for each student will be calculated using the peer assessment from the IBS module. This individual mark is weighted at 100% for the BS2 module. Students are provided with the appraisal criteria in Semester 1 and have to appraise the performance of each member in the team. This underpins the criteria for the peer assessment in Semester 2.

In the reflective assessment the teams look back over the two semesters and compare their behaviour with Belbin Team Role Theory and other models/theories used in the module. The team produces a learning statement indicating the learning points for the team and how these will be used in the future. This provides a summary of skills development in the team and what has been learned during the IBS and BS2 modules. The learning statement includes reflections over the period of the module and provides an opportunity for the team to take a more dispassionate look back at progress made from the start of the module and to demonstrate what has been learned.

Teams are advised that due to the nature of a reflective assessment it is not possible to complete it at the end of the module and that major learning points need to be noted during the course of the module. In addition, it is not possible for the team to complete a comprehensive reflective assessment unless thoughts have been recorded over time by the various individuals in the team. Students are advised that it is essential that team analysis takes place in the early stages of the modules and is then continuously examined for any changes or progress. As well as the completion of the various inventories it is suggested to students that the main emphasis should be on reflection and analysis.

CONCLUSION

A business simulation provides a framework for an interactive and challenging experiential learning environment. The students gain experience, develop skills and confidence through a realistic simulation which provides vicarious experience without detrimental consequences if mistakes are made. It offers students an opportunity to improve their decision making, group, leadership and other personal skills in a low risk environment whilst simultaneously encouraging the analysis and application of theory to realistic problems. Teams are encouraged to analyse, synthesise and evaluate the effects of their decisions on their company's performance and take responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers.

During the course of the modules students have to gather data, analyse and evaluate it, discuss and solve problems in teams, organised and controlled by themselves. They also have to come to terms with an approach that operates from a position that knowledge is derived through

interaction, not simply transferred from the tutor to the student. In the independent learning climate facilitated and developed throughout the two semesters of the IBS/BS2 modules, a significant proportion of time is devoted to small group work and interaction between students so that key skills may be developed.

An independent approach does not preclude traditional pedagogy. Lectures and tutorials are used at the start of the programme. Over a period of time students are gently encouraged to change thinking habits and not to view tutors as the main source of knowledge and understanding. This approach means that students have to face the fact that their performance is a product of their own behaviour and that of others in their team. It confronts individualism, encouraging students to recognise that no one team member possesses all of the information, skills, or resources necessary to achieve the task and ultimately gain a high grade. This is a reflection of organisational life where solutions to problems are rarely generated without help from other team members. Sharing ideas and interacting with others improves thinking and deepens understanding. Students learn that learning, like work, is collaborative and social not competitive and isolated.

Initially many students resist the approach and may be dependent and hostile, which may lead to frustration for other students. Students may feel insecure with modules that draw content from other subject areas and are unable to gain the 'right answer' by reading academic books and journals. This requires patience from tutors until the students adjust. However independent learning leads to a broader understanding because students 'learn to learn' as facts and formulae are not routinely presented to them. By the end of the modules, students who are sceptical of such a major, sustained group task realise the benefits of an independent learning approach and recognise that they have developed skills that will remain with them for the remainder of their lives. It is heartening to hear students, on completion of the modules, make comments such as 'now I understand accounting'.

Group diversity, in terms of experience and knowledge contributes in a positive way to the learning process and independent learning improves the students' problem solving strategies. The Executive business simulation creates meaningful learning experiences rooted in real world problems and provides students with the opportunity to analyse, examine and evaluate ideas independently, and to gain valuable experience that will prepare them for the challenges of organisational life.

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