

TEACHING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS ONLINE: USING LEARNING OUTCOMES TO DEVELOP A CASE-BASED COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This demonstration will show how the University of Southern California used an outcomes-based design approach to create an online course in Strategic Corporate Communications. This course used case studies as its chief pedagogical tool and resulted in higher levels of demonstrated learning than its on-the-ground predecessor. The primary focus of the demonstration will be on practical design techniques that participants can take home and apply immediately to courses they are moving online. A secondary focus will be on the actual teaching and administration of the course and the differences in demonstrated learning.

Communications 502: Strategic Corporate Communications is a Masters-level course given by Dr. Rebecca Weintraub at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communications. Its primary goal is to prepare students to work effectively as communications officers at publicly-held companies.

In its traditional format, the class met for fifteen sessions ranging from an hour and a half to three hours in length. Four of these sessions were given over to guest speakers. In the rest, student listened to lectures from Dr. Weintraub, a Ph.D. in communications with invaluable real-world corporate experience. Dr. Weintraub had also created four short case studies to be scattered throughout the course. Students worked on these in small groups during the last hour of class and briefly presented their results.

Other course activities included readings from professional journals and texts, a term paper, a take-home final exam, and a group project in which students developed a strategic communication plan for an actual business or non-profit organization. Topics covered in the course include:

- Knowing Your Organization
- Creating the Strategic Communication Plan
- Corporate Vision, Mission, Strategy and Goals:
- Employee Communications
- Human Resource Communications
- Investor Communications
- Executive Communications
- Media Relations

- Brand and Reputation Management
- Coping with Corporate Change
- Crisis Communication

The Center for Distance Learning at the University of Southern California was charged with the task of converting this course to a 100% online format. Ultimately, the online version was designed around seven two-week modules. Each module began with a case study presented by Dr. Weintraub and supplemented by dramatizations by professional actors. After this presentation, students worked through a series of resources and online activities designed to develop the skills needed to address the case. To give a fuller picture of the course, we have attached an appendix containing a text version of a dramatized online case.

The Center for Distance Learning would like to propose a demonstration of this course at the ABSEL conference. It will be presented by the course's professor, Dr. Rebecca Weintraub, and the instructional designer, Robert Tisinai.

The primary focus of the demonstration will be on how to create a case-study-oriented online course by using an outcomes-based instructional design approach. A secondary focus will be on the actual teaching of the course and the effectiveness of the learning; this should be of special interest, given Dr. Weintraub's assessment that the learning demonstrated by students in the online version of the course is higher than that in the traditional format.

The structure of the demonstration is listed below:

- **Introduction:** We give a brief teaser of what the course looks like; then we present background information on the original purpose and format of the course, and challenges we faced going into the design process
- **Learning Outcomes as a Design Tool:** We discuss how to create a set of learning outcomes that can be mapped effectively onto appropriate learning activities. The portion emphasizes the use of Bloom's Taxonomy as a practical (as opposed to purely theoretical) design tool.
- **Case Studies and Other Learning Activities:** We present examples of dramatized online case studies as well as other online activities that were designed to guide students to mastery of the course's conceptual material and practical challenges.

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- **Teaching the Course:** We discuss the actual implementation of the course, focusing on teaching challenges and learning results. The portion will allow extensive Q&A.

Teaching Strategic Corporate Communications Online will be a very practical demonstration, presenting concrete techniques that participants can take home and apply immediately to courses they are moving online. It should prove a valuable addition to the conference roster.

Appendix: Human Resources Case Study

Consolidated Electronics has been acquiring small, regional companies to expand CE's national reach. D. Emmet Shane III, CEO and grandson of the founder, is faced with a new wrinkle in the execution of his strategy. Last fall, he was contacted by Gregory Chalmers, CEO and founder of 25 year-old Expeer Electronics, a large, privately held industrial electronics manufacturer and distributor. Expeer has been growing at the rate of 20% a year for over five years, has never suffered a layoff, and is renowned for its customer service and employee retention rates. Chalmers wants to retire and wants neither the hassles of an IPO nor the uncertainties of being a takeover target. He likes Shane's, appreciates the way he runs his companies, and sees a number of synergies between Expeer and CE. Chalmers has offered his company to Shane at a price that makes it very attractive to CE.

Shane is pleased by the financial aspects of the offer, but concerned about the employee issues. Expeer has a benefits package that is at the top of the industry. Health insurance is fully paid for the employee and family. There is no pension plan, but there is a 401k with a 3% match that is administered by Fidelity. Additionally, yearly profit sharing has been paid for the past ten years into the same Fidelity account. For most employees the profit sharing has averaged 10% of their yearly salary. Employees are very pleased with Fidelity, including the investment company's customer service, web and phone account tracking systems, and the high rates of return in the 1990's. Additionally, employees with more than 10 years of service have received small amounts of stock on each service anniversary. Each share of the privately held stock is valued at \$1500.

Shane's concerns go beyond the human resources issues. Expeer, as befits a privately held company, has shared little of the overall financial issues of the company with employees in general. Employees understand little of the business beyond those issues that directly affect them. They are very aware that they have a work situation better than most of their friends and neighbors and beyond that have little interest in the bigger issues of the company. They refer to themselves as members of the Expeer family and few have ever worked anywhere else.

Expeer employees don't know much about CE, but they think they know enough to distrust the entire concept of the merger.

Shane meets with two of his vice presidents: Harry Dramon, VP of HR, and Marcella Krabow, VP of Corporate Communications. He asks Dramon to describe for him the benefit package that will be offered to the Expeer employees.

Dramon explains that these employees will not receive the existing CE pension plan because as a defined benefit plan it is very expensive. They will receive the following:

1. A cash balance pension plan
 - The company will allocate a benefit credit to an employee's account using a simple formula based on age, years of service, and pay. The account is a notional account rather than a true account.
 - The account will be credited with an interest rate that is updated monthly
 - The value of the account will never decrease
 - Vesting will be immediate, and the vested cash balance benefits can be taken with employees if they leave CE.
 - Distribution options range from lump sum distribution to various length annuities
 - The cash balance benefits are inheritable (as opposed to traditional defined benefit annuities that are not).
2. A flexible health benefits plan
 - Employees will receive health care credits depending upon their family situation (single, married, married with children, single with children)
 - Employees will be able to use these credits to purchase the health plan that best serves their family needs
 - If the employees want health care options that cost more than the health care credits to which they are entitled, they may purchase them with before-tax dollars
 - Additional benefits, such as life insurance for children, legal insurance, and vision care, can be purchased with after-tax dollars.
3. Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP)
 - Employees may put aside up to \$300 per salary period to purchase CE stock
 - The stock will be purchased quarterly at a 15% discount of the lowest price in the 30-day period prior to the preset quarterly purchase date
 - Employees must hold the stock for three years following the purchase
 - Employees are immediately vested.
4. 401k Plan
 - Employees will be immediately transferred into the CE 401k plan that is administered by Charles Schwab
 - Within 60 days their Fidelity Plans will be frozen and their balances transferred to Schwab
 - Employees may choose between 250 various Schwab funds, but they may not put either their Expeer 401k funds or their CE funds into Fidelity
 - Employees will have access to Schwab's new web account management system.