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USING CASES IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

The modified case study method promulgated through the Exxon Educational Foundations Guided Design grants under their IMPACT program is a practical way to give business communication students problem-solving experience.

The underlying premise of Guided Design, originated by Charles E. Wales, Director of Freshmen Engineering at West Virginia University, and Robert A. Stager, University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada, is that students learn more by tackling problems in small groups or individually and by writing subsequent reports than they do by listening to lectures or reading even the best texts and being tested on them.

THE GUIDED DESIGN GRANT

Guided Designs method of experiential learning had been successfully used in many science and some social science courses until 1977, when San Diego State University received a small grant to test and implement the method in a business communication class. This was the first use in a class already involving a great deal of writing. (Since the method requires at least a writing assignment per case, it added quite a lot of writing to engineering courses and others like them.

How Guided Design Works

During a semesters work, business communication students would normally write solutions for 10-12 short cases and at least one long case involving outside research. Current students usually don't have enough background in real decision-making skills to do a thorough job on these cases, tending to skip steps such as evaluating all alternatives in order to hurry to the answer of the case, even though communication problems tend to have no pat answers.

The open-ended problems used in Guided Design work as follows:

- 1) Students are placed in groups of 5-7 and choose a leader.
- 2) They receive the problem one step at a time, discuss that instruction, and arrive at conclusions or suggestions as directed.
- 3) Each groups leader keeps track of the groups discussion and reports results to the instructor.
- 4) They receive the next instruction when they demonstrate that their discussion has reached a successful result.
- 5) Each leader writes a report of the groups activities; each member writes a report using the case knowledge to solve a further problem.

The logistics of this method are perhaps its only drawback. I am experimenting with the less cumbersome plan of handing out the problems in packet form after cautioning students that the whole point of the assignment is to do the work step by step and as a group, rather than looking ahead to find the answer. The most persuasive argument, of course, is that there is no single right answer to these problems. Outline of the Moving Company Case

One project that I've successfully used so far requires students to choose a moving company for their firm, which frequently either hires new executives or transfers current employees, thus needing a predictable move r.

ICC figures (on underestimating, late pick-up, 'ate delivery, damage over \$50, and days to settle a case) are used to compare more than 20 moving companies identified only by number. When I had used this case without breaking down the decision-making process step by step, students seemed to pick a company without any justification--they may have had reasons, but their choice motivation was rarely explained.

Using the decision-making process--

- Situation or setting
- Gather Information
- Choice of Solution
- Constraints
- Evaluation of Choices
- Analyze One Choice in Detail
- Synthesize Plans for One Part of Solution
- Synthesize Plans for the Whole Solution

--students were forced to decide what criteria would affect their choice, and most important in this problem, to realize that \ and employee would have slightly different ideas about what constitutes a perfect moving company. Analyses of this problem improved remarkably after the step by step process was introduced.

CHOOSING A MOVING COMPANY

Many business reports solve problems of choosing - the most feasible solution, the most cost-effective method, the most efficient equipment, the best person (or firm) for the job. In this Guided Design problem you 11 be asked to choose the best way of moving across the country. You 11 use information on moves and on communication theory as well as the decision-making skills you've practiced in Guided Design.

Instruction A Problem/Goal/Choice/Solutions

Eastern Company is relocating 100 employees across the country to a new branch office, to either Seattle or San Diego. Various departments are evaluating the two cities by marketing, sales, income & population criteria. Laurel, a new management trainee now assigned to the office of John Zane, the controller, is asked to identify the best method of moving employees household goods safely and efficiently across the country. What options are available to move 100 people, their families, and their goods across the U.S.?

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(The double lines follow each instruction--the remainder of the page is left blank. The resulting feedback from the group appears on the next page and is handed out only after the group has come to a conclusion about the instruction.)

Feedback A

Laurel made a list of these possible options:

- 1) hire a national moving company
- 2) pay employees to use U-Haul/Ryder, etc. trucks or trailers
- 3) move goods in company trucks

Instruction B - Constraints

"What constraints are there on my choice of movers?" Laurel wondered. "What do people consider when they are choosing a method of moving?"

Make a list.

Feedback B

Laurel's list looked like this:

cost
time
damage
safety
insurance
bother
family members
pets
amount of goods

Instruction C - Evaluate choices

"Assuming that most of the employees are people with a family and a house full of furniture," Laurel thought, "some of my possible options may not sound so possible when I evaluate them against my constraints." According to the constraints of time, money, safety, & bother, what would be the best option for moving Eastern Company? Laurel tried filling in a decision chart so she could visualize her choices better.

(A decision chart is inserted with the instruction to put a number from 10-1 --most - least-- to indicate how much each factor counts in considering each method of moving.)

As you can see, the decision-making process is broken down into very small and specific steps. This is somewhat frustrating to business students, I've found, since they tend to be very task oriented and want to know immediately what the end result is going to be. Once they've learned the importance of solving problems in a logical way, of course, they are less apt to skip steps. Later projects can move from one step to the next more quickly once the initial pattern is established.

The last step of the project generates a written assignment:

Instruction J - Synthesis

"O.K.," Laurel thought. "Now all I need to do is pick the company or companies that best meet these ranked criteria."

Write a 2-3 page memo to John Zane, Controller, Eastern Company in which you synthesize the criteria and explain your choice of mover(s) and your reasons.

Homework

Read Persuasive messages, ch. 11 (p. 384-396)

- (1) Case #3 p. 397 (appeal to re-enter school)
- (2) Design a questionnaire to find out employees' experience with moving. Use the tips about kinds of questions to ask and how to ask them in pp. 463-466 of your text. Try to elicit information that you can quantify as much as possible. Bear in mind that you'll take these answers into account in choosing a company, but that you'll also be basing your decision on ICC figures and other data.

Parallel Project

Using the steps you've just practiced,

identifying the problem
selecting options
identifying constraints
evaluation choices
analyzing criteria
synthesizing a solution:

- 1) Write a two page memo explaining your choice of some item of equipment for your office (typewriter, micro-computer, furniture, etc.)
- or
- 2) Write a two page memo explaining your choice of major/job field.

These reading & writing assignments are similar to those given in a regular business communication class, but I have found that students using Guided Design are able to write at a higher level of sophistication than those who have drawn their information from lectures and reading assignments alone

STUDENT WRITTEN CASES

The second semester I used this case method, the last Guided Design assignment was to write a step by step case. It seemed possible that the assignment would prove impossibly difficult for some, but I also hypothesized that students who understood how to work through projects could also create them in a limited format.

The Assignment

I asked students to first write the outline for a decision-making case of their own, preferably beginning with a case in the text. They were to list the

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steps and describe briefly the instruction and expected feedback for each one.

After writing peer evaluations of others outlines, each class was divided into groups of 4-5. Each group then choose one members outline and expanded it into a full case, eventually typing it up like the model case already given here.

The Resultant Cases

While all the cases weren't completely practical to use in class, the best cases received were excellent. Students wrote about computerized check-cashing in supermarkets as a means of drawing more customers, designing a data sheet, buying a car for a real estate sales job, choosing a retirement benefit for a small company, solving space problems at a small manufacturing company, deciding what action an adjustment manager in a retail store should take, designing the advertising campaign for a new restaurant, and solving an order problem, among others.

Students tended to use less "story in their cases, instead presenting the facts in detail and describing the desired action. The most common areas of weakness were omitting a good written assignment at the end of a case or not giving enough of a reading assignment as background information so that students using the case could logically be expected to come up with the needed feedback.

THE EFFECT ON THE COURSE

Since students generally solve another written problem using the new decision-making method at the end of each case, the amount of writing done in the business communication course can remain about the same as in a regular course, while the quality of the thinking behind the writing drastically improves.

Lecture time is reduced and outside reading is correlated to the cases so that students can spend class time actually solving problems in business communication rather than listening to usually one-sided discussions of communication theory.

While I am not using Guided Design exactly as it was originally designed, I will be glad to show instructors in other areas how this type of highly structured case could offer an innovative and useful way to help students learn content material. The original method, described in an available film¹ and in an excellent book² by the originators is best perhaps for the quantitative functional areas such as accounting, statistics, and information systems, while my revised method would work well in management, marketing, finance and other areas which are more subjective in their content.

¹ The film (#31864 GUIDED DESIGN) is available for free loan from:
Film Scheduling Center
Modern Talking Picture Service, Inc.
2323 New Hyde Park Rd.
New Hyde Park, NY 11040
Tel: (516) 488-3810

² Guided Design by Charles E. Wales & Robert A. Stager.
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University, Morgantown, W.Va.