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Interaction on the edge

Prue Cruickshank, Allan McLarin and Hadley Brown
UNITEC Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the richness of an applied communication group project which incorporates writing skills, interpersonal skills, team dynamics, problem solving, decision making, time and stress management, interviewing and both individual and group presentation skills. In addition students were asked to maintain learning diaries for reflective learning and also to carry out peer assessment at the end of the process. This project was developed in response to the professional competencies required by accountants identified in research undertaken for the Institute of Chartered Accountants of New Zealand. The project is also intended to develop emotional intelligence. The workplace project is undertaken by a team of four students from diverse backgrounds and requires them to negotiate with an employer to carry out the project in an organisation. The project is in its second semester, and is still a little on the edge for students in the early stages of their tertiary education.

EMPLOYER RESEARCH

Results of a 1997 ACNielsen McNair Survey of (New Zealand) Employers' views on Diploma Level Business Qualifications indicated that the Business Communication course (140) was the most relevant paper with 63% of respondents rating it very relevant.

A survey by Hodge et al of the Top 500 New Zealand Companies and relevant recruitment agencies, identified the perceived competencies of graduates required in the workplace (1999). The results are available in Appendix 1 where a comparison is made of the competencies required in 1999 and desired for 2009, comparing their overall rankings.

Applied Knowledge or Work Readiness of Students

A concern of employers has always been the work-readiness of graduates. In 1995 Chris O'Reilly surveyed employers for the specific skills they required from employees. Their major concern at that time was “Relevance to reality in the workplace” and “Lack of practical application” of tertiary courses generally. Table 2 shows the specific skills required by employers in the survey by Chris O'Reilly in 1995 and presented at the New Zealand Diploma in Business Conference in July. (O'Reilly, 1995). See Appendix 2.

As the 140 Business Communication paper is a core course in New Zealand largest tertiary programme, it seemed an appropriate course to ensure that students not only learnt the requisite communication theory, but also developed the requisite competencies to meet employers' needs. In addition the learner developed critical thinking skills and self-awareness to assist in their lifelong learning. Refer Appendix 2, Table 2.

Evolution of the project

At the end of 1998 the lecturers involved in the delivery of 140 Business Communication wanted students to:

- stand out in the employment market
- develop the range and depth of interpersonal skills
- build their career assets
respond appropriately in diverse situations
• become autonomous learners
• operate effectively in the workplace
• integrate socially for success and retention purposes.

To develop students as autonomous learners they needed to develop an awareness of their own strengths, weaknesses and preferences. This included developing their awareness and respect of others by developing empathy and an appreciation of other cultures. The teaching team also needed to model these skills and values.

They analysed the knowledge and skills required (national prescription), the competencies that were needed (Hodges et al 1999) and prescribed the classroom processes that could be used to achieve them.

Some of the elements of the project were developed in previous workplace report writing assignments, which were done in pairs and subject to peer evaluation. The project assignment extended this concept by requiring a diverse group of four to undertake the workplace project. Group work was supported in tutorials where possible, and feedback points built in throughout the semester. This feedback shared knowledge and progress with the class to enhance everyone’s progress and learning.

DESIGN OF THE PROJECT

A semester timeline was developed for the project and the various stages and skills required were identified. The content delivery was then developed to meet the requirements of the project as much as possible so that the students were involved in experiential learning. After six weeks each student had to write a memo reflecting on the effectiveness of their own and their colleagues’ interpersonal skills, and how effective they believed they were in teamwork. The information for the memo was based on students’ Learning Diaries.

The project had to be undertaken in a commercial organisation. Students negotiated with the manager of the company to get permission, agree on a communication topic, plan and carry out the research, and prepare a report for the company.

In addition the project required students to provide a Draft Outline Report, and give an Individual and a final Group Presentation. The Report mark in the group could also be affected by whether individuals had been perceived to contribute equally. This is determined by Peer assessment at the end.

Skills required to successfully complete this assignment include the ability to approach and negotiate with an organisation, to be successful in planning and executing time-management plans. Students needed to have back up plans when other arrangements fell over, which meant being flexible. Students needed to show initiative in their groups to solve problems and advance the project. They also needed to be able to identify with the customer, in this case the organisation, and so frame up their communication from the organisation’s point of view and the staff in it. Only by effective teamwork and co-operation could this project be completed.

RESULTS

Results available at the end of October 1999 are based on the completed first semester’s work, and the nearly completed second semester’s work.

Collaborative Learning

There were a few dysfunctional groups as a result of lack of skills, confidence or a negative attitude. As groups were required to self select after several weeks, quiet, shy and retiring students waited for others to choose them.
When that didn't happen, they had to form their own group. These "weaker" groups struggle, but extra help offered was not accepted. However such students can still achieve and succeed collectively which they might not have done working solo. In Semester One there were four dysfunctional groups, that is sixteen students out of 130 students. In Semester Two there are three, that is twelve students out of 100. In previous years these students would possibly have dropped out. Nearly 60% of the students in these classes speak English as their second language, and visiting New Zealand workplaces is a daunting prospect for them.

Collaborative learning is used not only in the project, but also in classes to ensure students take advantage of the diverse opportunities and challenges of a multicultural classroom. Consistently students identify group-work as an activity they really appreciate and enjoy in their evaluations of the course. Examples of positive comments from the SEQUAL*3

- (I like) The encouragement of interaction with classmates to stimulate relationship building
- Group-work helped me to get to know others from other ethnic backgrounds
- Being involved with groups was also good for real-life situations
- Have enjoyed the interaction with colleagues

Measuring Emotional Intelligence

This project was designed to develop as many facets of a student's behaviour as possible. However, measuring improvements or developments is problematic. In the first semester students were surveyed near the end of the course to assess how much they believed (a) they had improved or developed (b) their team-mates had improved or developed during the course. This meant asking for a retrospective assessment of how effective students believed they were at the beginning of the course. Unfortunately retrospective surveys are not very reliable. This semester a measurement was taken at the beginning of the semester and students will be surveyed towards the end independently. What was interesting from Semester One's results, was the variation between self perception and peer's perception of growth. Many individuals considered that there had been only nominal development, whereas their peers often observed considerable development. It is hoped that statistical data from Semester Two will corroborate this observation. Goleman (1995) claims that emotional intelligence includes self awareness, persistence and empathy. To be a member of a successfully completing team would suggest that members had these attributes.

Cultural and Personal Learning Styles

Both classes and the project offer a range of learning opportunities for all students to ensure that students with different learning preferences are catered for. South Pacific indigenous people may be predisposed to an aural/oral tradition, and all students appreciate the use of visuals to enhance delivery. Videos are used to provide a context for the material. Students with English as a second language need to see what is being discussed to overcome some of the accent difficulties. All students have to participate in presentations, and occasionally role-play exercises are included for the more kinaesthetic learners. A number of students have very highly developed academic and business skills from their own countries, and can contribute constructively to both the class and the project work from this knowledge base.

Pedagogical Advantages

Cross (1992) described both the intense involvement, and higher level learning of students in active learning opportunities, which required them to analyse, synthesise and evaluate information. Students planned their formal communications to elicit relevant and useful material, then interacted with a range of people to collect information. Students then used their critical thinking skills to evaluate and organise this material into a cohesive and useful report to present to the company. Students have been assessed on the outcome of these interactions, namely their

*3 Student Evaluation of Quality (SEQUAL)
memos, reports and presentations. It has exploited, challenged, and extended the students' multiple intelligences. Nearly all students have completed the course.

CONCLUSIONS

The project has provided both rich and real learning opportunities for the students. While possibly not all students will pass, all participating students will have gained an insight into their own style of communication and its importance in a business environment.

A greater range of assessment tools may be needed to substantiate the claim that it has developed the competencies identified as important by employers. However students who complete all facets of this assignment are likely to have both the attitude and competencies described. Whether the project enables students to stand out in the employment market has yet to be tested. A number of students, by their own testimony and their work, have considerably developed their range and depth of interpersonal skills. Those who pass the course are likely to be autonomous learners and be able to operate considerably more effectively in the workplace. However this claim may need to be followed up in two years to be justified.

The project needs refinement and ways to reduce the workload on students will be sought. Future development will focus on assessing learning outcomes more accurately, and making the course as much fun as possible.