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Business Problems Analysis: An Integrated Skills Development

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Abstract

Business Problems Analysis (B.P.A.), a skills based course, is a core component of the B.A. Business Studies Degree at Hatfield Polytechnic. This course, which has been running for six years, has very little formal input, rather, students, individually and in groups, experience a range of tasks which are designed to develop their personal competences. These competences are needed throughout working life, and, specifically, in order to cope with the placement period, which occurs during the third year of the course.

Three tutors work together on B.P.A., mainly because the seventy students on each year of the course can have someone readily available to provide support when required, but also because a wider pool of expertise becomes available. Two hours student contact are timetabled for each week of the first two terms, constituting an eighth of a student's programme.

B.P.A. and 'Business Operations', a course which provides an understanding of the major business functions, are together seen as the core of the first two years of the degree. Other courses are expected to relate to the core and build on the knowledge and skills developed in it. Students must pass B.P.A. in order to progress on the scheme. However, at present B.P.A. does not contribute to the final award as such.

Year 1

The emphasis in the first year is on the development of: information gathering skills; written and oral communication skills; interpersonal skills, and keyboarding/computing skills. Also, students investigate possible career paths.

At the start of the course students are given an explanation of the significance of skills in relation to future careers. Experience has shown that students respond better to the course when it is put into this context.

Assignment 1: The Business Report

We regard the ability to obtain required information as being a fundamental skill for all students. In a rapidly changing world, where knowledge can soon become redundant, it is essential to know how to go about obtaining the latest, relevant, intelligence.

At Hatfield Polytechnic all first year students are given a comprehensive introduction to the library. In addition, the students on the B.P.A. course have, as their first project to investigate a current business issue and produce a management report, demonstrating that they can use the sophisticated information sources which are available in the library. Over the years these reports have covered a multitude of subjects, such as: increases in house prices; sexual harassment; satellite television; the Sinclair C5, 'Big Bang', the Channel Tunnel, etc., etc. The subjects change

each year in order to maintain topicality and eliminate 'copying'. Our feedback shows that students appreciate the choice of subject that is available and realise the importance of being able to use a library properly. The benefits of possessing report writing skills become apparent as students progress through the course and, subsequently, when they take up employment.

Students do not find report writing a particularly easy task as they are often rather stuck in essay mode. A verbose, unstructured style is not uncommon. In particular, they may not appreciate the significance of terms of reference, indeed these can be determined after the report has been written. Also, the conclusions and recommendations may be superficial and unrelated to the body and each other. This may be because the conclusions and recommendations are not readily available from another source and hence the traditional 'scissors and paste' job cannot be executed.

Originally, this report writing exercise was carried out individually, but two years ago we moved to making it a group exercise. There were two main reasons for this change. Firstly, a seminar on student withdrawal had indicated that there could be an 'induction crisis' for individuals, and that a key factor here was an inability to make friends, found particularly by those students who lived off campus. Getting students to operate as a group was seen as a partial remedy to this problem. Secondly, we were keen to introduce students to the problems associated with group-working. Even nowadays it is not at all unusual to find that ex-sixth formers have little experience in this area.

Content Analysis

We ask the students to write up the reflections of the group experience. Then we carry out a content analysis on the answers and discuss the results, which can be categorised as follows: initial attitude towards group working; adopted approach; group process; conclusions about group working.

Although the initial attitude of some students is negative, because they prefer to operate individually, more students adopt a positive attitude. Interestingly, this is mainly because they think less individual work is required, but also because there is a recognition that it is better to do a new, complex task within the security of a group.

The adopted approach varies, with some groups selecting a leader and others relying on democracy. It is noticeable that most groups try to ensure that the work is shared equally. Despite this aim there is recognition that some people work more than others. Groups usually set target dates for the completion of individual contributions, with some groups adopting novel penalties for late submission, such as a 'fine' of 1 pint of beer/day late. The groups do tend to appoint one person to coordinate the various contributions, and in this task word processors are found to be of great assistance.

Group process is the main area upon which the students reflect. They recognise that it is important to have someone within the group to initiate the project. However, they do find that no-one is prepared to be leader, or that the leaders did not do his/her job properly, usually because they are not forceful enough. Eventually, it is clear that the stronger personalities come to dominate. This can lead to conflict and a failure to draw on the ideas of all group members. Some students recognise that group working forces them to learn to listen to others.

The morale and motivation of the groups varies. Groups with low morale have either failed to agree over objectives, or have found it difficult to obtain information, or have simply failed to get organised. High morale groups tend to be interested in the subject and are motivated by deadlines so as not to let the rest of the group down.

The main conclusions made by students about working in these groups are that: (1) more ideas are generated, (2) it is a benefit to have the criticism of others; (3) the process develops personal confidence; (4) friendships do develop; (5) some group members do not pull their weight. Overall, the exercise is seen as useful as it increases student awareness of the benefits and problems associated with group working and this is helpful when tackling other group assignments on the course.

Assignment 2: Questionnaire Design/Survey

Here, student groups have to design a questionnaire relating to campus life, and carry out the associated survey. The collected data must be analysed using a computer. Currently, students are looking at creche facilities, student reading, the refectory, etc. This assignment obviously develops a basic research skill, which will be required elsewhere in the course, and during working careers.

Questionnaire design hones a number of communication skills, notably the ability to be concise, to structure, and to minimise ambiguity. Use of the computer builds on basic computer literacy skills and enables an introduction to a variety of software packages.

As with the previous assignment, students can come to realise the importance of specifying objectives, relating subsequent activity to those objectives, and then assessing achievement against the original specification.

Assignment 3: Business Report Presentation

This assignment builds on the first business report assignment, and requires each group to give a presentation to the 'clients' (3 lecturers). Students often find this rather daunting, but at least they have a sound knowledge base which does help with confidence.

There is a tendency for groups to give a serial presentation, as one person stops talking, another pops up to do his/her element. We do give some formal input on presentations and explain that not many sports teams send one player on at a time, that it is more usual to have greater co-operation. Most groups respond and develop interactive presentations, using debate formats, or interviews, or playlets, etc.

When providing feedback we normally begin by asking students to reflect on their performance. Often, they are rather too modest, claiming, in particular, that they appeared nervous, when, in fact, this was not obvious to observers. Also, students usually underline the importance of planning and rehearsal. Interestingly, the better performers often have had some experience of drama.

Later in the academic year students tackle an accounting presentation and feedback from staff and students reveals that they have greater confidence and presentation skill than groups from other schemes who have not followed the B.P.A. course.

Assignment 4: Career Paths

This assignment requires students to: (1) describe the major career paths open to a graduate in Business Studies, and, (2) isolate one of those career paths and explain how they would achieve a successful career in the chosen area.

Although this assignment is not really skills based, it is included here because it helps students consider the type of sandwich placement they might pursue and what types of knowledge and skills are required. It is noticeable, prior to the assignment, that many students only have a vague idea of what they want to do, and the problems they might encounter during a career.

After the assignment they may still not be sure about what career to follow, but at least they have more understanding about available options, and future learning needs. What can come as something of a shock is the realisation that further study and qualifications may well be required after graduation.

Year 2

In the second year programme we develop existing skills further. However, the emphasis is on the development of problem-solving skills in a business context, with particular reference to the placement which takes place in year.

Assignment 1: The Application Form

The first assignment in the second year requires students to complete a computer company's graduate application form. This form is not easy to complete because it requires answers to a range of searching questions e.g. Are you more successful working alone or as a member of a team? How do you 'break the ice' with someone you are meeting for the first time? Actually, the question that students usually find most difficult to answer is, 'What was the most innovative or imaginative thing you have done at college, either academically or extra murally?'

This assignment is required because the students have to apply for sandwich placements at around this time, and obviously it helps to have a coherent, grammatical application which presents the person to their best advantage.

Each student receives detailed feedback about their application form. Here, spelling ability often comes under particular scrutiny, as does the use of over-long sentences. Interestingly, some people manage to leave out important information, such as being head-boy or winning national competitions.

Although this assignment only appears to develop a particular technical skill, the discussion with a tutor usually leads to an isolation of those skills which could be developed further and an examination of how this might be achieved e.g. greater involvement in the drama society, walking the Pennine Way, organising a trip to a foreign country, developing a new idea for rag week, etc., etc.

Assignment 2: Sandwich Placement Assignment

This assignment requires students, operating in groups, to analyse a series of problems that have been faced by students on placement, e.g. boredom, criticism, inappropriate clothing. Each group has to make a presentation isolating possible alternatives, explaining their rationale for the adopted solution.

The presentation has to be as imaginative as possible, and, over the years, students have found video to be a useful route to originality. The adopted format seems to vary according to who is the current most popular T.V. performer. Here, under the chairmanship of an elegant person, the winning student had to come up with the 'right' answers, and undergo various gruesome ordeals on the way.

This assignment is fun. It develops group, creativity, problem-solving and presentation skills. It gets students to consider problems they might encounter on placement and highlights the need for tact and diplomacy. It is a good lead into assertiveness training, which we introduce a little later in the course.

Assignment 3: Student Innovation Award

The 'fun' continues with this next assignment, where students, in groups, have to submit an innovative idea to the Student Industrial Society's 'Innovation for Business' competition. Here, we introduce creativity techniques, particularly brainstorming, and then leave the students to get on with it. After submitting their idea to the competition the students give a presentation to their peers.

In 1989, several teams got through to the second round of the competition. Their novel ideas included: an orange-scented bin bag to deter cats; a rechargeable washing-up brush, a golf tee for beginners and 'The Grippa'. The Grippa group suggested a foam rubber strip for plastic supermarket bags so as to make a strong re-useable handle which would stop the bag cutting into the hand. This group went on to produce a business plan, and came second in the competition overall, only to be surpassed by a 1990 team who devised an electronic bleeper for locating lost children.

Assignment 4: Spudsons Brothers

Here, groups have to tackle a case study, Spudsons Brothers, concerning a wholesaler of fruit and vegetables. Spudsons are expanding and want to install a computerised system which will take account of their current and future needs. The students have to advise, produce a report and make a presentation. Stress is laid on the decision-making process adopted. This is a major assignment and we rather see it as a consolidation of skills previously acquired on the course. Also, it is good practice for projects that may well have to be carried out during the industrial placement year.

Client Related Project

The Spudsons case study was based on work some of our students did for a client in the early 1980s. We do try to include such a client related project within the B.P.A. scheme where possible. If so, students are excused one or more of the set assignments.

One year, all students, in groups, produced a communications questionnaire for a local brewery company. The best questionnaire was adopted, given to the workforce, and the findings were reported to the main board by students. The subsequent donation of several crates of beer was enjoyed at an end-of-term rounders match.

Other projects have included a study of the 'perks' given to staff at a local drug company in order to determine how the money spent might be better allocated. A student from this group considers that this experience was a distinct help when it came to obtaining a 'plum' job on graduation.

Students have produced job descriptions for a charity which led to pay rises for several of the staff involved. Currently, groups are looking at ways to market a community centre, and carrying out a green audit. The students enjoy these real-life projects. They feel that they have actually achieved something and in the process learn about business and the decisions which are made. One problem is that projects can be time-consuming and so encroach on time which should be spent on other subjects.

Years 3 & 4

Students spend their third year on placement. We regard this year as an excellent opportunity to develop and consolidate skills initiated during the first two years of the course. To assist this process we have produced a Skills Development Statement which lists a wide range of transferable

skills and their components, and gives practical examples of how these skills might be developed on placement. We have encouraged students to use the Skills Development Statement to negotiate changes in placement activity.

We have produced a new type of placement log book, which encourages reflection on work experience. Now, instead of a written diary of events, students have, each month, to analyse a significant event, and consider what has been learnt as a result.

We use the Training Objectives Profile, produced by Manchester Polytechnic and the Council for National Academic Awards (C.N.A.A.), to assess the student experience of placement. The results for 134 students (1987-90) show that they do develop a range of skills well. Also, in particular, they identify major career needs and develop: maturity, self-confidence and self-reliance. As far as year 4 goes, we are still in the planning stage. However, we expect to include the following: an assignment requiring students to reflect on their placement learning; a poster fair, whereby fourth year students explain their experience to others; preparation of a curriculum vitae., a leadership skills exercise, and management of a business game, conducted for Hertfordshire schools.

Assessment

We are conscious that skills may take some time to develop and that the development process can be somewhat erratic. Hence, we really regard assessment as being formative in nature, and we use feedback to build on strengths and to examine areas for improvement. Also, we are keen to encourage adventurous approaches and feel that too much emphasis on assessment can cause students to avoid taking risks.

We have criteria for the content of assignments in order to facilitate consistency of making by tutors, and also so that students know what is expected. However, we do not formally assess group performance, although we do give formative feedback.

Student Evaluation

We do ask students to appraise the B.P.A. course. On the whole their judgement is favourable. For example, in 1989, the appraisal results were as follows:

- 85% agreed/strongly agreed that BPA 1 developed their ability to work in a group.
- 76% agreed/strongly agreed that BPA 1 developed their report writing skills.
- 74% agreed/strongly agreed that BPA 1 developed their ability to find business information.
- 73% agreed/strongly agreed that BPA 1 developed their oral communication ability.
- 71% agreed/strongly agreed that BPA 1 helped to identify the career choices open to Business Studies Graduates.
- 70% agreed/strongly agreed that BPA 1 developed their questionnaire design skills.
- 67% considered the course to be interesting/very interesting. The major problems for the students were: non-cooperation of group members, arranging times to meet, and the difficulty of collecting information. Also, in the early days of the course they criticised breakdowns in communication between the staff teaching the course. This was remedied by ensuring that all administrative communication with students was via one member of staff.

Overall, the staff leading the scheme are more than happy with its progress. What was once a rather marginal activity has become accepted as a valued course component. Students enjoy themselves, and in the process acquire useful skills and self-confidence. They find that they have something substantial to talk about at interviews, and that, subsequently, they do employ their skills in their working lives.