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COMMUNITY CONSULTING PROJECTS: TEAM-BASED SERVICE AS AN UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING LABORATORY FOR EFFECTIVE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

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Abstract: Undergraduate business education is widely designed to build core skills in essential business functions such as management, accounting, marketing, information systems and finance. Yet increasingly, employers expect additional strength in the soft skills that allow for effective collaboration and implementation of projects in the business environment – skills that have not been prominent in the traditional business curriculum. Primary among these are communication, collaborative problem solving, and an ability to work effectively across cultures, industries, and areas of specialization. Problems-based learning is a method that raises engagement while fostering a more active student learning process, and one that particularly relies on communication collaborative problem-solving to achieve its results. This paper explores specific ways that a problem-based learning model in Business Communication can enhance student engagement, promote a deeper grasp of key skills, and enable students to transfer their learning to the post-graduate work environment.

Introduction

The world of business is the world of action. While researchers in all disciplines devote themselves to understanding principles, analyzing patterns and envisioning trends, business professionals are challenged with translating a wealth of information and insight to solve problems and achieve results – often, in urgent situations with no clear precedents or roadmaps for success.

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In preparing students for this world, business schools face a challenge: They must impart and cultivate competence in the traditional business disciplines – management, accounting, marketing, finance and so on -- while at the same time helping students apply their knowledge to meet complex, dynamic and often ambiguous business demands. Moreover, business students have a relentlessly practical focus: They are schooled in, and expect, a return on their educational investment, and seek classes that help translate theoretical learning to practical value in their anticipated careers. So, generating student engagement requires a vehicle for students to experience the strengths and gaps in their own skills, as they are tested within real-time business demands. (Ahlfelt et al., 9; Douglas, 2012: 42)

And in fact, employers today seek students with not just knowledge but transferable capabilities, particularly in the soft skills required for effective action (Bennett ,2002: 458; Douglas, 2012: 36; Drohan et al., 2011: 97). These include decision-making, improved communication with non-technical users, flexibility and ability to decompose problems, collaborative skills, teamwork, interpersonal skills, conflict management, organizational skills, analytical thinking and self-directed learning. (Adams, 2015; Drohan et al., 2011: 95) These capabilities are included in core requirements of effective business communication, and are also central to the problem-based learning model. (Cotton, 2011)

Santa Clara University takes pride in addressing both employer and student expectations but also in meeting pressing global and community needs. The university mission is "educate citizens and leaders of competence, conscience and compassion," applying knowledge to solve problems that "build a more just, sustainable and humane world." (Santa Clara University, Mission, 2017) Faculty are charged not just with providing information and know-how, but ensuring that students can apply their skills in all disciplines, in service of the common good

Business faculty continually explore new approaches to help students achieve these ends. The case review method, for example, is a mainstay of business education, and exposes students to thorny problems that confront leaders in business and communities today. Yet, while case studies allow students reflect on what others have done (or failed to do), they offer limited experience in the skills that the students themselves must demonstrate, even in entry level positions. (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2013: 20) This is particularly true of such skills as effective writing, speaking, project management and collaborative communication. These capabilities are

best honed in conversation – written, oral, digital and personal – with real human beings, in all their complexity and with vast differences of background, culture, expectations and needs.

Santa Clara's Leavey School of Business provides numerous opportunities for students to engage with business leaders in Silicon Valley, and to explore solutions to real problems affecting the wider community and the globe. Effective Communication in Business (BUSN 179), an upper-division course in the core curriculum required of all business majors, is integral to fulfilling this mission. This course combines practical assignments in communication -- written, spoken, visual, digital and personal -- with a 10-week project in which students apply principles learned to address a real-world business need within a specific "client" organization.

Effective Communication in Business: A Problem-Based Approach

In the context of BUSN 179 students reach out to a non-profit organization, business or public agency whose work makes a substantive contribution to the surrounding community (or occasionally, to communities in other parts of the world). In partnership with the client, students define a problem currently faced by the organization or its constituents; propose a specific solution and a path to fulfill it; work to implement that solution; and deliver a final presentation and report.

This assignment, the *Community Consulting Project* (CCP) is a team-based endeavor designed and implemented by students working closely with representatives of their client organization. Following a problem-based model, the project is conducted by student learning groups working under the guidance of a faculty mentor. Students collaborate to address a specific challenge, simultaneously developing communication skills essential to business effectiveness: research and analysis of a problem, writing for varied audiences in a variety of formats, creating and delivering presentations, resolving breakdowns, applying technology to serve specific needs, and engaging in all aspects of the team-building process.

A successful project requires students to integrate these skills with the varied capabilities acquired in earlier classes. They must assess and apply data; define clear objectives, metrics and budgets; plan and manage task structures; report outcomes, and visualize information in ways that translate to diverse audiences.   Finally, students engage in a continual process of dialogue and reflection, encouraging them to identify the ways that their current and prior learning is called upon to address the real demands of a professional work environment. (Ahlfelt et al., 2005:

6; Cotton, 2011: 3; Ramsden, 2005: 141). What follows is an outline of the steps of the Community Consulting Project, specifically explaining how the assignment exemplifies the use of problem-based learning to build strength in effective business communication.

Building the Team: Group-Based Learning

The first step in the CCP process is the selection of teams. In some cases, faculty may pre-assign teams based on student backgrounds; the intention here is to ensure that each team includes an appropriate mix of relevant capabilities and skills. In a somewhat "messier" approach -- but one in keeping with the ill-structured nature of problem-based learning (Stepien et al., 1993) -- students spend the first session in a "networking" process that culminates in the self-selection of groups; the idea is to include a cross-section of necessary skills, interests and individual strengths on each team. The latter approach has a dual benefit: First, since individuals play a role in determining team membership, they often experience greater buy-in to the project than if either the problem or teammates had been assigned. Second, the "networking" process at the start of semester helps create a cohesive bond throughout the class. Individuals are generally more willing to speak, to share learning, to raise questions and to ask for help, not only within teams but in the class group as a whole.

To facilitate this process, students arrive to the first class session with the name of an organization that they believe is making an impact on the community or society, and that they find inspiring. As students circulate through the class, they are asked to share about their organizations and any connection they may have with them. Additionally, students are asked to self-identify the particular skills and personal qualities they would bring to the project. They are told that each team must include, at a minimum, someone to fill the following roles:

- Team management and facilitation
- Writing / editing
- Financial and metrics tracking and assessment
- Client and community outreach ("people" skills)
- Creative and/or media coordinator

In the course of this process, many students will have identified a number of possible teammates; these informal groupings are written on a board, along with the type of organization they would like to serve.

Typically, students have identified organizations representing a wide range of community needs. These might include, for example: energy, ecology and conservation; educational support for disadvantaged youth; support for medical advances in specific areas; job development in economically depressed communities. By grouping interests into four or five broad areas, students can gain an overview of the prospects on the board, and express interest in those that are most compelling to them. Students then organize themselves into interest-based *and* functionally appropriate teams; faculty may adjust the groups to ensure well-designed teams, each including a cross-section of functional skills.

Securing the Client

Working in groups, students must now reach out to an intended client, explain their intentions, and persuade the client to work with them through the coming ten weeks, including attendance at a formal presentation of results. Often, first or second-choice clients are unavailable for the project and students must expand their networks and reach out to organizations with which they have no existing connection. This process stretches their ability and willingness to extend themselves into the community, and create an introduction sufficiently compelling to attract a client's interest. If necessary, the faculty mentor may refer teams to possible client networks. The Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship at SCU, or example, works with startups pursuing socially-minded ventures around the world; the Neighborhood Prosperity Initiative offers similar opportunities closer to home. Regardless of where the referral originates, the process of reaching out to a client they may not know or know well, and persuading them to collaborate with a student team for the next nine weeks, is a key learning opportunity in the context of Business Communications.

Defining the Problem

This done, students meet with the client to define a specific problem to be addressed, and a scope of work that can reasonably be accomplished during the span of the course. As in business, teams work in partnership with clients to identify specific needs or opportunities that the client values, and that this team of college juniors / seniors can realistically address. This is a negotiation process: Often, teams come prepared with a particular solution to a problem they find important, but which is not among the client's priority needs. Conversely, clients have sometimes

pre-defined projects that they hope to complete with student labor, but present little challenge along the way. To succeed, problem definition involves a give-and-take: By working to grasp the mission, purpose and strategic objectives of the client, and identifying specific barriers to achieving those ends, students can analyze problems and develop creative solutions that, in nearly all cases, provide significant benefit to the client that they would not otherwise have achieved.

This step is crucial to project success. With the support of the faculty tutor, teams are challenged to define a project that satisfies client needs, is rewarding in outcomes and learning for students, fulfills core requirements of the Leavey School of Business, and is in keeping with the overall mission of Santa Clara University.

Each project must be sufficiently broad to ensure that the outcome has real and demonstrable value to the organization and/or its clients or constituents. Yet, it must be sufficiently narrow that students can realistically achieve target objectives with the time and resources available to them. Success metrics must be defined as outcomes that can be measurably achieved (or not) by specific points in time. In many cases, these will be deliverables that the team itself can produce, to a specific level of effectiveness, within the time frame of the project. In some cases, however, the outcomes are measurable only in part in the duration of the class; for example, a website designed to attract and retain sponsors can be measured in part (is the website complete, attractive, well written and designed, etc.?) but more fully over time (will the number of sponsors increase over the coming weeks or year, and will they fulfill their commitments to the organization?). Looking from the client perspective, students are asked to answer, "How do we know this project actually worked? Was it worth the time, energy and (hypothetically) funds invested in it?" If the goals of the project extend beyond the 10-week quarter, that question may be not be fully answered until some months down the road.

With respect to curricular demands, the project should elicit the students' creativity and competence in varied forms of business communication. For example, students must craft a proposal to the client that defines the project need, action plan, outcome and deliverables, budget, and schedule for completion. For many projects, some form of marketing or outreach will be a key element; these projects will include production of whatever media or collateral are required to fulfill the goals. Others may focus on data analysis, technology, or other solutions that call on a specific set of business skills. In addition, all projects call for a willingness to speak (orally or in writing) with others, ability to write and revise collaborative products, an ability to use visual

media to convey clear information, and so on—all competencies defined as key to effective business communication. The project culminates in a multimedia presentation delivered to an audience that includes client representatives from all projects in that class.

Collaboration: Peer Work Groups and Faculty Mentoring

The assignment prompt outlines clear deliverables that students must meet; first among them is a well-crafted formal proposal to define the project need, action plan, outcome and deliverables, budget, and schedule for completion. An additional section of Appendices will provide examples of actual work products that the team creates (marketing collateral, websites, videos, technology solutions, data analytics and so on). The project culminates in a final report to assess outcomes and learning, and a multimedia presentation delivered to an audience that includes client representatives from all projects in that class.

Typically, students disperse accountabilities for the various elements among the team and hold weekly work sessions to ensure all elements are cohesive and on track. Teams are coached to build a working structure that includes meeting schedules and communication modes, clear objectives and due dates for each member, a "critical path" display to demonstrate how each element fits with the whole, and a clear timeline for completion of all elements.

In the second week of class students are coached in various roles and interactive processes that will facilitate strong and effective teamwork. Additionally, they are given suggested ground rules for providing regular team feedback and support. Inevitably, this is a trial-and-error process as each group explore the collaborative structures, technologies, and division of roles and accountabilities that best fit their needs. Each team also has a series of formal check-points: For example, in Week 3 students provide the faculty mentor a formal "contract", signed by the client, outlining their stated scope of work. In Week 4, the class conducts a "round table" review in which each group presents its client problem, proposed solution, action plan, deliverables and challenges, and seeks feedback from the larger group. In Week 5, students submit their formal proposal, outlining the entire plan for the completion of the project. Throughout this process, the faculty member provides frequent coaching and support, offering alternative ideas where needed, and ensuring the project stays true to course.

In addition, one or more full class periods are designated as team work days when students can meet with their clients, preferably on-site, and ensure projects are set to meet client expectations. If they wish, they may utilize the time to work collaboratively on campus,

supported by a videoconference meeting with the faculty mentor. These conferences are an opportunity to discuss integration of basic communication skills – client relations, writing (correspondence, emails, memos, proposals, marketing materials, short and long reports etc.), public outreach, digital communications (social media, interactive websites, videos) and creative visual design -- in service of overall project needs.

Lectures: Theory, Principles, Skills

In order for students to complete a project, they must be equipped with basic principles and "rules" of business communication, which may be quite different from the academic style they have honed in their earlier school careers. Students must learn common conventions of business usage (focus, formats, language, tone, and the like), as well as facility in the various possible media and how to select and apply them to fill a specific purpose or address a specific audience need.

In this class lectures are given once or twice weekly, with remaining class time devoted to discussing the application of theory and principles to specific business situations.. Because of significant variation in the scope and nature of the problems, teams must take initiative in applying general principles of business communication to their own project demands, appropriate to the culture and requests of each client. Moreover, as in business, problems continue to evolve and objectives may expand, narrow, or otherwise change in the course of the project. Part of the learning is an ability to balance the necessity or desire for such changes, by clients and teams alike, against the parameters of the deliverables they have pledged to fulfill.

It should be noted that students strongly prefer brief lectures, supplemented by relevant video clips, and followed by a longer time frame for discussion and application. To the extent possible, lecture content should dovetail with challenges that students encounter in their concurrent projects. If students are applying the material as it is presented, with opportunities to seek specific feedback from the faculty mentor, they are far more likely to integrate theory with practice, and gain confidence that they can apply it in future situations. (Barrett and Moore, 2011).

Assessment

To ensure their continual progress, students are assessed at regular intervals throughout the course. The Round Table review and CCP proposal submission provide opportunities for extensive feedback, and a Final Report and Community Presentation will be reviewed at semester end. Additionally, each week students complete interim supporting assignments that offer practice in smaller, related tasks where students simulate a response to a "problem" situation. For example, they might create:

- a memo proposing strategies for improved cross-cultural communication
- a formal letter addressing an internal conflict, with suggestions for resolution
- an email to a manager raising objections to a newly announced policy
- a team post-mortem of a visual presentation gone awry
- an internal proposal for an organizational change initiative

These assignments are typically "low-stakes" exercises designed to simulate ordinary challenges and build competencies, fluency and confidence in research, writing and presenting in a business environment. While not a direct part of the CCP projects, these tasks ensure that students are engaged in communication problem-solving – written, spoken or visual – for each class. Together, they provide the scaffold on which students integrate and apply the practical skills they will need to solve larger problems in the business world and beyond.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has explored a particular process of applying the problem-based learning model to teach effective communication skills to undergraduate business school students. The process is embodied in a Community Consulting Project in which students, working in teams, partner with a client organization to identify a real-world problem, propose a solution, and design and implement a plan of action to deliver their solution within the time frame of a quarter-long university course.

The problem-based model is particularly well suited to teaching communication in a professional context: It requires students not only to learn basic formats, media and channels, but to transfer them to the demands of a current business challenge. It should be noted that the process works best at upper-division levels, where classes are smaller and student experience and maturity have reached a level that allow them to understand and maximize the opportunity presented. The process clearly elevates student engagement through a project that is accessible,

relevant, and that allows them to strengthen and demonstrate capabilities that are in high demand among employers today.

By engaging fully in this project, students demonstrate the type of active learning that they will utilize as they grow in their own professional careers. Moreover, as they construct insights and practices, learning takes place at a much deeper level than afforded by a traditional undergraduate lecture approach. In a discipline like communication, this engaged learning can provide a basis for continued growth, not just in communication but in other skills required for business success.

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