A Feminine Approach to Teaching a Large, First Year University Course: And Everyone Lived Happily Ever After!

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Abstract

University of Southern Queensland (USQ) first year business students were more likely to pass MGT1000: Organisational Behaviour (OB) than any other Bachelor of Business core course during the period 2003-2005. This case study discusses the teaching approach of an all female team and outlines possible explanations for the favourable pass rate. Important to this case is that it shows women collaborating to support each other and their students through the learning journey. The Teaching Team intuitively implemented its teaching strategy and methods whilst engaging in critical reflective practice. This occurred within the realms of a teaching philosophy based on concern for the academic welfare of the students and manageability of workload for teaching staff. Support for these approaches is found in the literature on student success and retention as well as educational and feminine discourse theory. On the basis that the Team considers these to be the major contributing factors to the success of the OB students, this paper will address the Team's teaching philosophy; curriculum planning; course content; teaching materials and methodologies; student learning outcomes, and innovation in teaching.

Introduction

This paper details our female team teaching experience that, indicative of a feminine intuitive approach, conforms to a number of theoretical ideals of best practice, even though finding the time to think about pedagogy in theoretical terms is a challenge. We discuss our experience from two perspectives. Firstly we briefly consider the feminine workplace discourse surrounding our teamwork as the three female course examiners. Secondly, the discussion turns to the design and delivery of the course in which we incorporate features of feminine rhetoric and communication. Our approach has proven to be some measure of success, with semester one, 2005 statistics showing that our course attained the highest pass and lowest fail rate of the eight faculty core courses and secondly, with the provision of a faculty teaching excellence award in 2007. These suggest an appreciation of a feminine approach by both students and colleagues.

The course in question is MGT1000 Organisational Behaviour (OB). It is offered over every semester and is a core course within the Bachelor of Business (and other Business courses) at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The total number of students enrolled each year is approximately 1100 individuals. It is offered at various campuses within USQ and by a large number of overseas partners. While OB is a core course, it is often chosen as an elective by students from other faculties. This brings a new dimension to the course as it then needs to meet the needs of students who have little interest in business as an area of study but who may potentially find the key concepts useful, particularly in relation to future management or supervisory positions.

The Feminine – the Yin of the Yang

Whilst people possess a mixture of masculine and feminine traits (Lindsay & Pasquali, 1993; Gunn & Gullickson, 2007), the literature on organisational theory and teamwork tends to be written in a masculine dialogue (Metcalfe &Linstead, 2003). The masculine/feminine dichotomy can be described, from a psychological perspective, as the action and achievement oriented, individualistic, competitive, focused and independent 'masculine' versus the expressive, relationship building, intimate, attachment orientated and caring 'feminine' (Lindsay & Pasquali). A person's use of masculine/feminine traits is heavily based on social conditioning, with a 'healthy' expression being one where both masculine and feminine orientations are balanced (Lindsay & Pasquali, Gunn & Gullickson).

Relevant to this case study are the aspects of teamwork and communication. The transference of the feminine traits listed above to the literature on communication suggests that a feminine approach incorporates the disclosure of personal information or

experiences, and/or sharing narratives, examples and anecdotes in order to meet the desire to make a connection with the audience (Johnson, 2005). Inductive reasoning is also highlighted by Johnson as a feminine aspect of communication whereby the communicator illuminates facts, incidents or examples to the audience, before drawing a conclusion based on the presented information. Secondly, within the context of teamwork, the feminine aspects are those that are associated with the relational aspects of the team (Holmes & Schnurr, 2006, Metcalfe & Linstead, 2003) which demand "collaborative and supportive work attitudes" (Metcalfe & Linstead, p. 97). Relational practice is described by Fletcher (1999, in Holmes & Schnurr, p. 36) as "off-record, people orientated behaviour which serves to further workplace goals." An example offered by Holmes and Schnurr (pp.35-6) of relational behaviour is the feminine language people engage in when they want to show considerateness and concern for a person's ego by using a variety of 'hedges' and 'minimisers' such as: could; may be; might; I think; probably; a bit. Interestingly, it is the feminine aspects of teamwork, process and relationships, which are the essential element of a successful team (Metcalfe & Linstead).

The Feminine in Teamwork – the Bernadette, the Kim and the Shalene

Our team has enjoyed the benefit of a friendly and collegial relationship. True to the suggestions that the feminine aspect of teamwork accounts for the relational and process aspects of a team, this team has at its foundation, three women who, over their cup of tea, without threat or competition, can openly discuss all aspects of their course. These discussions include topics such as things that did and did not go well in the course, sharing expectations and clarifying interpretation, discussing a course of action, developing new ideas and sometimes letting other ideas go and importantly, having a laugh! Essentially, this case serves to show the benefit of feminine traits in teamwork underpinned by the theoretical suggestion that successful team output is the result of intrinsically feminine traits of collaborative and supportive attitudes of each member (Metcalfe & Linstead, 2003).

The Feminine in Communication – the Design and Delivery of the Course

Teaching a large first year course is simultaneously challenging and exhausting. The excitement and stress involved with presenting to a class of over 200 on-campus students while managing an online course website for an additional 300 or so students carries with it its own set of anomalous stressors. Some of these include planning the semester, crafting teaching materials and designing presentations and all of these are creative tasks which are not well defined by any workload formula and tend to reinforce the concept of the university as a "greedy organisation" where workers are placed under exponential pressure by demanding but also interesting and exciting jobs (Rasmussen, 2004). So it is hardly surprising that much of our own course design and delivery has evolved organically over time, through a long association with students and an equally long association with teachers and an understanding of their needs. Key pedagogical concepts for higher education, such as the issues of transition, the importance of "social presence", constructivism, and reflective practice all provide sound theoretical bases for our teaching. However, in our case their application came about largely through the practical wisdom and accumulated experiences of the Teaching Team. It is a happy coincidence that we later found our approach to teaching was supported by both university policy and theory (Hambrick, 2005, in Kilduff, 2006).

The Feminine Inspired Team Teaching Philosophy

In our role as course designers and course examiners our underlying teaching philosophy exhibit aspects of 'feminine leadership traits' which incorporate the championing of family friendly policies, openness, teamwork and communication (Everbach, 2006) and feminine relational practice of concern for the people involved in the course and their goal achievement. The impact of the Team's teaching philosophy on the evolution of the course has been profound with the adoption of the following three key (feminine) principles to which we test each innovation and or/each reflection: 1) Is what we are doing educationally sound? That is, will it enhance learning outcomes? 2) Is what we are doing equitable to other students? 3) Is this a reasonable expectation that will not drain the life force out of us or our students? (This involves inserting a concern for work-life balance for both the Team and students into our curriculum design). The following sections of this paper will show how a feminine premise has influenced key areas of our course design and delivery, which are curriculum planning, course content, teaching materials and methodologies, and innovation in teaching.

Curriculum Planning Our approach to curriculum planning also reflects our philosophy, but it also conforms to disciplinary understandings of 'best practice' for team teaching and large first year classes with a diverse cohort. The Teaching Team's approach to curriculum planning has two significant qualities. First, it is student-centred, with a focus on the development of key skills which facilitate the transition of first year students into higher education (Barrie, 2003; Chanock, 2001; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kirkpatrick

& Mulligan, 2002) and contribute to the development of USQ graduate attributes. This is important because it reflects a key outcome of the business curriculum in higher education: to facilitate the transition of students from teacher-pupil dependency to adult independent learners (Boud, 2000). Second, it is collaborative, with all members of the OB Team making a vital contribution to the planning and implementation of curricular innovation.

The Faculty of Business preferred enrolment pattern is that students undertake this course in their first year of study. As a result, a large proportion of our students are new to the university environment. The Team has developed a curriculum that aims to facilitate the transition of first year students from a high school to an adult learning context. Because of its teaching philosophy, the OB Team consider this a prime opportunity, if not an obligation, to provide students with the opportunity to develop skills in the areas of research, the importance of accurate referencing and the implications of plagiarism, critical thinking and written communication. The Team's view is that these are fundamental skills that contribute to retention and progression by enabling students to successfully complete their chosen program. This has the added advantage of contributing to the development of the following USQ graduate attributes: 1) analytical and critical thinking skills; 2) information acquisition, organisation and independent learning skills; 3) communication and presentation skills; and 4) an awareness of the need for, and an understanding of high professional standards and ethical behaviour.

At a fundamental level, the curriculum develops students' comprehension of the traditional OB theory taught across universities. However, disciplinary content is delivered in a way that transcends the traditional paradigm of 'teaching content', which students are expected to use 'intuitively' to solve management problems. In OB, we constructively align teaching practice with expected learning outcomes, such as problem-solving, by setting a challenge or problem for students to solve, providing them with task-specific learning support, feedback and explicit skills-based teaching, which enables them to resolve the challenge. This process is explored in detail under the criteria of course content, teaching methodology and learning resources.

Innovations in the course curriculum have evolved as a result of a collaborative team process - with each of the triad providing an essential contribution which has had a significant impact on course design and delivery. This reflects a well-known OB maxim that teams are more than just a group of individuals. It requires team synergies and reflective practice to maintain our focus across semesters whilst Team members rotate through the course leader role. As an example of individual

Team contributions, Bernadette currently fulfils the overall leadership role which involves such things as undertaking the major rewrite and scheduling of assessment topic areas. Her contribution tends to reflect her experience with the theory of the course as well as her extensive teaching experience. Shalene provides expertise in developing the exam database to which the three members diligently contribute in successive semesters. She also improved aspects of social presence and collaborative learning in the course by laying the foundation for effective use of the discussion board and online media for all students but, in particular, distance education students. Kim uses her teaching experience to challenge team norms and contributes alternative ideas in relation to grading and assessment practices. Her talent for playing devil's advocate in our reflective practice discussions has provided a significant catalyst for change within the course materials and an enhanced version of the assessment rubric.

Course Content In addition to its theoretical focus, the course content demonstrates a sensitivity to its overall position in USQ's business programs, as well as an awareness of the first year context with its inherent issues of student retention and transition. Consequently, we provide several skills-based modules, which are embedded in the course content. These include two modules on the essential elements of essay-writing preparation. These research and academic writing modules cover areas such as: finding journal articles using USQ databases; guidelines on using the internet to search for sources; locating research support services from the Library; providing guidelines on how to analyse a case study; providing information on good writing resources and providing students with exemplars of good essays. These are designed with the end user in mind. For example, pictures of screens used to access USQ databases give students the information they require to successfully navigate this area and find the information they need.

The key idea behind integrating learning support measures into this course has been to build confidence in the students, which, in turn, enables them to excel academically. Our premise is that we provide students with the research and academic writing knowledge required for success in the course, which in turn gives them the courage and knowledge to believe that they can succeed, irrespective of their high school OP score or previous study experiences. This is achieved through a 'scaffolding' approach, which makes both required learning processes and disciplinary content more transparent and accessible (Chanock, 2001). For example, we teach them to access the library databases, and provide guidance in effective research, and then tutor the students in critical writing. This developmental approach promotes student success and results in

greater student retention and improved transition (Lawrence, 2005). Results show that the OB course had the highest percentage pass rate of all the courses in this category.

Teaching Materials and Methodologies The teaching material and methodologies provide the prime opportunity to incorporate feminine traits in the course as they serve as the communication channel between examiner and student. This current iteration of our course materials has benefited from the collective wisdom of the Team and our collective philosophical commitment to student retention and student transition to university. The core course materials are primarily made up of: the Study Guide; the Text Book; the Introductory book; the weekly two-hour course tutorial session; the course webpage; emails sent to all students in the course; and the course CD which includes PowerPoint lectures (most with audio) for each week the of the semester. A key value embedded in the materials is user friendliness. The materials needed to be something the students found easy to navigate. Consequently, we designed the Study Guide so that it is written in a clear, welcoming voice, which sets an overall tone for the course.

The voice adopted in the Study Guide and the emails which are sent to students over the semester explicitly addresses some of the emotional support issues that students may have (Lawrence, 2005). For example, students are assured that being confused, uncertain or overwhelmed is normal in study. The stresses associated with essay writing and exams are explicitly addressed. The feedback we have received from students on the tone of the materials demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach:

Personal comments in the study guide – felt like a 'person' was writing to me (USQ Student Feedback Form, Semester 3 2005).

Every thing was explained very well in the study book, so I don't know of any improvements… the study book was like she was talking to us face to face, so as an external student, this made me understand it very well. Good job everyone! (USQ Student Feedback Form, Semester 2, 2006).

In addition, the voice and structure of the study materials accommodate a range of learning styles, for example, audio breeze slides to reach mass numbers of external students.

I found the weekly lecture slides very helpful – it was like actually being there with the lecturer … this course was very helpful and clear – well done! (USQ Student Feedback Form, Semester 2, 2004).

The structure and voice of the Study Guide take many of the unknowns out of study in terms of time commitment. For example, the course is made up of ten modules with each module taking approximately one week to complete. It usually involves reading approximately thirty pages from the text. Each module is given a rating on a 1-5 scale to reflect its level of difficulty. Extraneous information has been structured out of the Study Guide given students' time poverty. Each module includes a brief overview of that week's reading that acts as a kind of advance organiser. The following is indicative of feedback we have received from students about this aspect of the Study Guide:

I found the ratings and commentary for each module very helpful! I liked knowing exactly what I was doing in each module. The module objectives were made very clear and were easy to find in the textbook. (USQ Student Feedback Form, Semester 2, 2006).

When appropriate, more difficult concepts are explained in some detail. These are written as a short stand-alone 'essay' with embedded exercises but no specific reference to the text. In terms of curriculum design these introductions take the student from: (a) The simple to the complex (we start by analysing a single definition and then move to comparing two and three definitions of the same concept as an introduction to critical thinking); (b) The known to the unknown (we introduce the concept of organisational structure by looking at a family tree); and (c) The concrete to the abstract (we introduce organisational structure by presenting a skeleton as a metaphor for organisational structure).

Each module includes a stand-alone section entitled 'learning objectives from the text', which lists each learning objective from the module and the page numbers in the text that relate to that learning objective. The following exemplifies feedback from students about the presentation of concepts:

This course was inspiring. I enjoyed the information and could easily relate it to day to day events, past and present life experience. Should be a must for everyone!! (USQ Student Feedback Form Semester 2, 2004).

A further key value that we wished to embed in the materials was transition friendliness. We wanted the materials in and of themselves to make the transition of students to university as easy as possible. The Study Guide makes explicit many of the unwritten tasks that students must complete to be successful in the first few weeks of their study. For example A 'Must Do Tasks' section is included in the first few weeks that identifies which learning materials students need to buy and where to by them; alerts students to the information technology demands of the course; advises about the final date for dropping the course; and directs them to the Student Services website for details on how to think through their options. The Study Guide also models, analyses and explains many foundation academic skills and values. These include how to analyse a definition; how to compare and or synthesise two definitions; the use of different genres in academic writing and

thinking; and the basics of essay writing and referencing.

The weekly tutorial activities usually serve at least two purposes: content coverage and modelling of basic academic skills. For example in the week on organisational culture students complete a brief writing exercise in which they analyse a case study about Nike and write a couple of brief paragraphs using a formula for applying theory to a case study. The two weeks prior to the submission of the essay are devoted exclusively to essay writing – with no new discipline based content being provided. The following feedback indicates the value that students see in the time devoted to transitional issues:

An excellent course for first year students; guided us through essay writing and using electronic resources in a very clear and instructive manner, (wish I had of completed this course earlier!!!) Many thanks (USQ Student Feedback Form, Semester 3, 2005).

I loved this course. I found the two modules on assignment writing very helpful and will use that information with other classes (USQ Student Feedback Form, Semester 2, 2006).

Innovation in Teaching Due to the large number and diversity of students enrolled in this course, innovative teaching has become a hallmark and a professional requirement for those who teach it. Some of the innovations introduced, complex or simple, have been introduced intuitively and have enjoyed success because they met the needs of the students. The flexibility and innovation of the OB Team has provided an ideal platform for introducing changes to the course, which best meet the needs of both the teaching staff and the students. These innovations include reflective practice (Fyfe, 2002; Radloff & de la Harpe, 2001) and building relationships (Zimitat, 2003) in a mass education environment.

In the assessment for OB we have included a learning diary, completed by the students in order to formulate in their own minds what is and is not working with their own learning. This process has the additional benefit of providing feedback from the students to the Teaching Team each semester on how they perceive the relationship between themselves and the course. Reflective practice has also impacted on the way we work as a team – on the way Team members debrief after lectures, unpack critical incidents, and discuss ideas before their implementation. Evaluation of how current theory can improve our teaching has proved to be an invaluable tool in enhancing our innovative practice.

Our experiences in OB affirm that social presence is a contributing factor to student success (Zimitat, 2003). In this course providing social presence to students in the form of regular class emails, the conversational voice used in the study materials and participation on the study desk has resulted in students feeling that they are relating to a real individual rather than a distant academic with no real identity or interest in their welfare. However, as this course is so large it has been important for the Team to set boundaries around the amount of time available for each student. As a result of this students are asked to always be prepared with specific questions when meeting with any of the Teaching Team; to have read all information relating to their topic of inquiry before asking for assistance, and to participate wherever possible in discussion groups and use other available on-line resources. Students are put in charge of their learning in other ways, running on-line discussion groups with the lecturer looking in regularly to monitor how things are going. This has resulted in a very collegial atmosphere on the course website, with students working to enhance their own learning and that of their colleagues.

Student Learning Outcomes Our efforts to provide effective teaching and learning support to our students have been quantitatively measured. It has been found that course retention and pass rates for students particularly in the low OP student group are the highest for any core course in the Faculty of Business. Results again have shown that in OB, students with an OP score lower than 16 (that is, 16-18) still managed to pass at a rate greater than the other core courses.

The OB Team believes that facilitating the transition of first year students into higher education provides a solid foundation for their future learning development. For this reason, we see student learning and student transition as being intimately linked. Consequently, we endeavour to create a sense of belonging and community within the student group to facilitate students' social transition to the university. We also actively value and speak to the issue of emotional intelligence and its role in study. For example OB has at various times hosted a citizenship awards function to reward students who add value to the learning environment. Students may be nominated by either the staff or fellow students for this award. Research shows that reflective learning plays an important role in university study achievement (Radloff & de la Harpe, 2001). We regard it as a critical component of student learning. Our valuing of reflection is demonstrated through the inclusion of the learning diary exercise as a formative assessment piece.

Conclusion

The supportive feminine traits identified in our case have provided a sense of satisfaction to the OB Team, intensified by the appreciation of the students. We have also been pleasantly surprised by the support we' have

received from colleagues who have affirmed the practices we have implemented. Premised by theory on the caring but persuasive power of a feminine discourse, our practical wisdom approach to our teaching has been confirmed by our research into the educational theory on transition issues, social presence, constructivism and reflective practice.

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