

Implementing business related projects in Foundation Commerce: business studies units

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Abstract: *Group-based class projects have been used as popular pedagogical tools by many institutions in developing team-work skills among students. The ability to work in teams is a much valued skill sought by many organisations (Shaw, 2004). Studies on the inclusion of business related group projects as assessments at foundation programs level, is scarce. This paper reports on a case study that investigated the perceptions of both students and staff regarding the inclusion of business related group projects in commerce units in a foundation programme. The study looked at students' learning experiences, knowledge gained, and attitudes towards group-based assessments reflecting the effectiveness and value of including group projects in commerce units. The units which incorporated group based projects include Accounting, Business Management and Economics. In general, students agree that group-based projects facilitate learning new skills or concepts from team members, enhance problem solving skills, and promote team work skills. The teaching staff's perceptions on the inclusion of the projects were encouraging and positive for most units. However, the implementation process of the projects for some units, warrant further investigation in order to enhance and improve the learning experiences of the students.*

Keywords: *group-based projects, effectiveness of business projects, business studies units*

Introduction

Academic accomplishment is not only signalled by the completion of an assigned work, but also by the extent to which students have engaged with the topics taught (Mousley & Campbell, 2007). In this study, business related projects were incorporated in business units offered in Foundation of Commerce program, namely, Accounting, Business Management and Economics and assessed. The project was designed to develop specific learning outcomes. The effectiveness and value of including these projects in the units were closely monitored with the perceptions of both students and teaching staff gathered. The paper reports on the effectiveness of implementing business related projects in commerce and business studies units.

Literature Review

A deep learning approach may lead to higher quality learning outcomes (2005, p. 21 as cited in Marton and Saljo, 1977; Prosser and Miller, 1989; Ramsden, 1992; and Trigwell and Prosser, 1991). Integrating teaching and learning activities and assessment using case studies can lead to opportunities for deep learning approaches (Jacobsen, 2007). Boyce *et al.* (2001) suggested that case studies may provide a vehicle for the development of deep learning approaches and student participation in groups will lead to richer learning (Ahlfeldt *et al.*, 2005). Current research on group-based class projects ranges from methods in assessing individual student performance (Kruch & Reif, 2001), formation of group team members (Shaw, 2004), the nature of classroom setting on different categories of students (Ashraf, 2004) to experiential learning using real-life projects. Studies conducted by Devasagayam and Taran (2009) on student driven projects in a marketing related course showed that feedback from students and insights from instructor and client businesses were closely aligned with the learning outcomes set.

Danford (2006), realising the significance of internationalisation process of organisations and to better engage students in international business courses, examined the use of Project-based Learning (PbL) where students collaborated with real organisations in carrying out real projects. Through PbL, students were noted to have worked closely with the chosen organisations and greatly involved in the decision-making process to deliver the desired result (Danford, 2006).

In this study relevant project based learning concepts were applied to evaluate the effectiveness and merit of including business related projects in business units.

Research Methodology

The study employed a systematic enquiry approach recommended in educational research, which draws on qualitative methods as deemed appropriate. It applied a case study approach to investigate the effectiveness and value of implementing business related projects in the relevant foundation of commerce units. The aim of the study was to attain the perceptions of students enrolled in the commerce units, as well as that of staff teaching the units pertaining to the inclusion of business projects in the course. The case study method is considered to be most suitable as the case study is “an in-depth study of the interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system” (Opie, 2004: 74). The case study approach enabled the researchers to focus on the real situation to provide comprehensive details about the implementation of the projects in the various business related units and understand the perceptions of students and staff towards them. Case study research, especially qualitative case study is a standard design for understanding and accounting for observations of the educational phenomena being studied

(Merriam, 1998). More specifically, the inquiry is inductive focusing on the process and interpretation of data gathered from the study emphasising the descriptions within a bounded context. As the study involved the exploration and analysis of student and staff perceptions towards the inclusion of business related projects in the course, multiple approaches were necessary. Student responses to the projects were recorded by the researchers. In addition, reflections of staff towards implementing the projects within the course were gathered through journaling. The data gathered was examined and compared with findings from previous studies to support emerging theories.

Participants

The participants for the study came from relevant commerce unit students enrolled in the foundation programme and staff teaching the units. The project implemented in the units form part of the learning and assessment process to demonstrate the learning outcomes of the units. As such purposive sampling is employed in the study. In purposive sampling, one selects the sample from which the most understanding or insights can be gained (Patton, 2002).

Procedure

The units in the Foundation of Commerce program – Accounting, Business Management and Economics included an assignment that requires students to plan and carry out a project relevant to the unit. The unit leaders for the units worked with the Dean of School to formulate the learning outcomes and procedures for the project. This project was monitored during semester 1 and 2, 2010 for perceptions of both staff and students enrolled in the unit. A generic feedback form was developed and uploaded on the learning management system – Moodle, to gain the perceptions of students. Staff involved in teaching and implementing the project used research journals to specifically record involvement of students, responses of students to the task as well as personal thoughts regarding the practical aspects of the project. The feedback form was submitted to the Ethics Committee for review, appropriateness and due approval received.

Analysis

The feedback gathered from students and staff was analysed to develop understanding of learning experiences and perceptions. A report was generated to quantify the experiences of staff and students towards the inclusion of the business related project in the units of foundation commerce.

Results

The questionnaire was designed to examine four areas: learning experience (L1 – L4), knowledge (K1 – K4) and attitude (A1 – A4) of students doing the group based project.

Students' Perceptions using Likert Scale

Based on a scale of strongly disagree/very low, disagree/low, no opinion/neutral, agree/high and strongly agree/very high, the data are further categorised into reject/low, no opinion/neutral and accept/high. Results of accept/high on each of the areas are summarised in Table 1 below.

		Business Management	Accounting	Economics
L1	This project has allowed me to work closely with my team mates.	75%	88%	87%
L2	This project has allowed me to	86%	91%	93%

	learn new skills or concepts from my team mates.			
L3	I have improved my communication skills as a result of this project.	80%	84%	85%
L4	Overall, how would you rate your learning experience in carrying out this project?	65%	87%	69%
K1	This project has enhanced my problem solving skills.	77%	87%	82%
K2	This project has helped me in understanding the theory taught in this unit.	83%	80%	88%
K3	Through this project, I can apply what I have learned in other similar situation.	77%	86%	85%
K4	Overall, how would you rate the knowledge you have gained from this project?	61%	88%	81%
A1	I have worked very well with my team mates.	63%	83%	86%
A2	I can learn more by working alone than working with someone else.	38%	60%	35%
A3	This project has helped me to develop more interest in the unit.	59%	72%	79%
A4	Overall, how would you rate the value of this project?	69%	83%	78%

Table 1: Percentage of students in “accept/high” category.

High percentage of students agreed or strongly agreed that inclusion of the team based group project as part of the assessments enhanced their learning experiences. These learning experiences were generated through the improvement of students’ communication skills, learning new skills or concepts from peers and building up a harmonious relationship between peers. Overall, 87% of Accounting students have rated high in their learning experience from the group based project.

There are 77% to 88% of the students in all units agreed or strongly agreed on improvement in their skills and knowledge from the project. In particular, they have enhanced their problem solving skills, a better understanding on the theory taught and the ability of applying the same concepts in other similar situation. More than 80% of the students from Accounting and Economics have rated very high in their overall knowledge gained.

A substantial percentage of students from Business Management and Economics were positive towards working as a team rather than alone while 60% of the students in Accounting agreed or strongly agreed that they can learn more by working alone. Overall, more than 78% of Accounting and Economics students have rated high on the value of the group based projects.

Students’ perceptions using open-ended question

By using content analysis, students’ comments are summarised in Table 2 below:

	Categories	Frequency	%
Business Management	Cooperate or work with others	78	59
	Understanding and apply theories and concepts learnt	39	29
	Improve communication skills	35	26
Accounting	Application of accounting concepts and skills	31	30
	Importance of team work	26	25
	Communicate skills	24	23
Economics	Understood and applied economic concepts and theories to real world situations	51	61.4
	Communication skills	21	25.3
	Gained knowledge	19	22.9

Table 2: Students' comments on the team project for individual unit.

The highest percentage of students who have commented on application of theories and concepts through group based project was achieved by Economics which accounted for 61% of the students. 59% of students have learned how to cooperate or work with others through Business Management group project. Students also commented on improvement of their communication skills and knowledge gained from the project.

Teaching staff's perceptions

Perceptions from teaching staff can be classified in three categories, namely, skills and knowledge, communication skills and team work. For Business Management and Economics, teaching staff have observed that the group based project has enhanced the learning experiences of the students towards a better understanding of the teaching materials and real world situations. Teaching staff from Business Management and Accounting have also observed the communication medium used by students, English, which is the second language to most of the students.

One contrasting view from the teaching staff's feedback on Business Management and Economics is the team formation process. It is noted that teams are formed based on arrangement by teaching staff for Business Management while it is self selection for Economics. This is based on the view to have a mix group of students from different background to create a balance and diverse group through teaching staff's arrangement. However, self selection by students can, on the other hand, minimise the conflicts among students.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the feedback from both students and teaching staff, it can be concluded that the inclusion of group based projects as one of the assessments in the units had enhanced the students' learning experience and knowledge about the subjects, as well as developing positive attitudes towards their learning. Besides, it is evident that the group based projects had helped the students better understand and apply the concepts and theories learned in the classes. Moreover, it was found that the students' communication skills, teamwork skills and problem solving skills had been enhanced. The findings of this research study had been consistent across all the subjects except for one item. The students in

Accounting tended to indicate that they could learn more by working alone while the students in Economics and Business Management tended to learn more by working with others. On the other hand, students in Accounting and Economics tended to rate higher score towards learning experience, knowledge and attitude when compared to the students in Business Management. This could remain research in the future to look into other possibilities affecting the effectiveness and value of team projects.

Due to the nature of the commerce units, the implementation process of each team project tended to be varied slightly. Thus, the enhancement of student learning experience through self selection or random assignment of team members cannot be justified in this research study. The unit coordinators of Business Management and Accounting formed the team project groups based on the students' background and some characteristics while self formation of group was used in Economics. Every research study is limited in some way. Many of the survey items will ask to recall and assess their previous characteristics. This could result in responses that are not truly reflective of the student's characteristics during the time of the survey. Although the findings in this research study were encouraging, research in this area must be continued to ensure that they are also significant in other study samples.

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