700 into 3: your first day in Business

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Discussions in early 2006 with colleagues within the Faculty of Business and Law centred on changing the induction experience for our students. Our objective was to enhance the induction experience for our Level 1 undergraduates during their first week at university. We appreciated that potential entrants had a very positive experience at open days and arrived at Leeds Met with anticipation and expectations. An additional consideration was to try to provide early feedback to students within their first few weeks at university on an induction assignment.

We wanted to achieve a sense of 'being launched' into a university life and a potential life as a business professional by creating a sense of occasion, inclusion and fun. We were aware that no lecture theatre on campus could accommodate the Level 1 cohort of our largest course. We needed much more space. The marquee on the Headingley Acre gave us the opportunity to accommodate all 600 students in 2006 and 700 in 2007 of the Level 1 students on the Business, Marketing and Accounting courses. It made some sense to connect the induction event to the Personal Development Planning (PDP) element of the student programme, as developing the student experience and personal development should start right at the beginning of the course. PDP is interpreted in the Faculty of Business and Law as PACE: Personal Academic and Career Effectiveness. The module is integrated with another module and the personal tutor scheme.

The challenges were immense. What activity, with any pedagogic sense, could we do to keep the 700 actively engaged for three hours? An event of this duration could give time to develop relationships, provide a sense of occasion and allow students to work through business-related tasks. How would we, by 9:00 am, seat them all at specific places at tables so they would find themselves with their tutorial group and personal tutor?

Our Faculty marketing, admissions and student support teams took up the logistical challenges while my colleague Siobhán Alderson and I turned our attention to planning the 'learning activity'. Was this the largest class that had ever taken place at Leeds Met? The prospect was alarming.

We set out to model something of "the dynamism and vibrancy of the business environment" (QAA Business and Management benchmark statement 2007) and to develop an activity and context in which incoming Level 1 undergraduate business students embarked on their journey as business students and as creative potential professionals in a business context:

"Self aware, confident, interested and excited. These people [creative potential professionals] perform higher, persist longer and demonstrate more creativity" (Ryan and Deci, 2000, cited in Georgianna, 2007).

The activity we developed was a business game: 'Paper Chasers'. The students were to work in teams to form a 'company' to 'produce' A5 notebooks. The product was chosen as it had a universal recognition factor and the raw materials to produce it could be researched. Each company had to work through business concepts in relation to Production, Marketing, Finance and Human Resource Management and each team was given a notional £100,000 of start-up funds. Our key objectives were to allow students to spend time with their fellow students, spend time with their personal tutor and embark on their learning. The game is underpinned by what Atkins et al (1993) would describe as "authentic tasks in 'realistic' settings". Brown et al (1989) emphasise the importance of authentic activity for potential practitioners: "Authentic activity is important to learners because it is the only way they gain access to the standpoint that enables practitioners to act meaningfully and purposefully." Modelling both the activity and language of business is an attempt to authenticate business learning. We aim to provide an initial experience of business terminology from the functional areas of business, especially for those students who have not previously studied business subjects.

This model of learning draws on a pedagogical principle of process dominance rather than content dominance (Rogers, 1986).

Teacher control

Content dominant ←——————→ Process dominant

Learner control
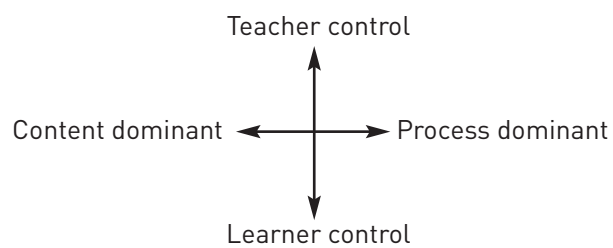
As the game formed part of the first PDP experience, we wanted to underpin the approach with a real focus on student ownership of learning.

Students were sent briefing notes with their joining instructions about their 'first day in business' in which it was specified that some research on the paper industry (e.g. paper and card prices, binding costs etc) would support their company. Students were also informed that the induction activity would feed into their induction assignment. The advantages of preparatory research meant that individual students might gain information for their first assignment and student companies did not have to incur additional costs to their company funds by having to 'buy' expensive management consultancy to ascertain prices etc. In 2006, we employed student guides through the Leeds Met Job Shop to act as consultants, and by 2007 we were able to employ the students with the highest marks in their PACE module for 2006-2007 to act as 'management consultants' who would 'sell' the research information which the business game developers had undertaken to those who had not done the research themselves prior to their arrival.

The student company output from the game was a poster identifying the name and logo of their company, the essence of their product, its unique selling point, their financial analysis, their marketing approach and their HR statement in relation to key factors in successful team working. The posters were judged against criteria by tutors and the top three teams were awarded prizes.

For our 'Day in Business' we also engaged the support of a real management consultant, Clive Wilson from Primeast Consultants who advise international companies in areas of global leadership, team working and strategy. Clive is also part of the Speakers for Africa network, raising funds for development projects in Africa. In 2006 Clive gave a keynote speech and in 2007 he introduced each phase of the game to talk about, for example, the company's vision, the need for clarity in objective setting in business and the effectiveness of team working and leadership.

> 66 I returned to study as a mature student after a 17-year gap, and it was with great trepidation that I awaited the return of my first assignment. On the morning in question, the lecturer came into the lecture theatre with an armful of scripts. He put them on the table and beamed at the class. "I'll give these out at the end of the lecture. Most of them are OK." I don't know how many other students remember as little about the lecture as I did. My eyes kept being drawn back to the pile, my heart rate rising.
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> I was increasingly convinced mine was one of the few that weren't OK – a feeling compounded when the lecturer moved the pile and I realised a few were bundled separately. I could see mine, covered in red and comb-bound among this tiny collection of obvious failures.
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> The lecture ended. I was now shaking with nerves, heart pounding, sweat beading on my brow. My assignment was returned. It wasn't the one in the small pile, nor were they failures; they had just been the last to be marked. My worries were groundless. Not only had I passed, but I'd passed comfortably. Relief! 99
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Once the event was over, students were given four weeks to complete their 500-word induction assignment, which formed 10% of their mark for the PACE module. During the four-week period, PACE tutorials focused on academic writing and the use of the Harvard referencing system. Students had a choice of topics, e.g. the business environment for the paper industry, team working, marketing, etc. The work had to incorporate appropriate academically acceptable literature and be properly referenced. In addition, the students added a 100-word reflection on their experience. This was often sufficient for students to crystallise briefly the essence of their reactions to the induction event. In this way we gain a valuable insight into their perceptions and so are able to adapt the business game and the event logistics for the next year.

The activity was generally positively evaluated by participants:

"I think that the Paper Chasers day was very effective for team building as you can see what the people in your group are like and what their strengths are."

"... when I attended Paper Chasers, I thought that it was very well organised and presented excellently. It could have been more orderly on entering and departing the marquee. I would have taken more charge in the group and adopted a more managerial approach.... I think the induction activity was useful in allowing me to become more friendly with the members of my tutorial group and overall I thoroughly enjoyed the day.

"I believe that the Paper Chasers event was a success due to various factors. I think that the organisation of the event was done fantastically as it gave me a chance to meet other members from my tutor group and develop good team working relationships with them. I enjoyed the fact that it gave me an insight in working with a production team and how a business works. If I was to rewind the clock I think I would have done a little more research into the product we were making to give the team more of an informative boost."

The next scheduled 'First Day in Business' is on Wednesday 24 September 2008. All observers are welcome.

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