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Quickulum: A Process For Quick Response Curriculum Verification

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Abstract

This paper addresses the need for a method of continual and frequent verification regarding course content taught in some post-secondary courses. . With excessive amounts of information generated within the workplace, continual change exists for what is taught in some of our business courses. This is especially true for specific content areas such as Retail Management. This paper proposes a process for verifying and updating course content in order to stay current with workplace trends which these authors have called “Quickulum: A Process for Quick Response Curriculum Verification.”

Keywords: Curricula, Course Content, Retail Management

Introduction

Changes across corporate America have caused universities to respond with curriculum adjustments to prepare students for a new type of workplace (August & Caouette, 1998). One of the most important questions that we, as educators, should ask each time we prepare to teach a course is “Are we teaching content that reflects current trends in the workplace?” Answers vary, but ultimately these answers are derived from a process of curriculum assessment that assures content validity. Ornstein and Hunkins (1988) indicated that content validity was related to the concept of “authenticity” (of content selected). In other words, in order to know whether we are teaching what we should be teaching, we must make sure that the content of our current curriculum is authentic in accuracy, currency and comprehensiveness. But who judges whether or not a curriculum is truly authentic: professional accrediting bodies, “experts in the workplace” or professors in that field of study?”

Various higher education accrediting bodies encourage continual updating of curriculum content. With more accountability required for educational programs, the assurance of valid content is much more likely to occur via regular assessments and updates. Such assessments provide insight regarding the value of the curriculum as related to its designed purpose and the appropriateness of a curriculum for various student populations, instructional modes, content and instructional materials. Evaluation is implied in the very process of planning or selecting of content that places value on something or determines its merits (Saylor and Alexander, 1974). The International Association for Management Education (AACSB), for example, promotes such continuous improvement processes in collegiate schools of business. Specific requirements include the systematic monitoring of content to assess effectiveness and to stimulate revisions based on contemporary theory and practices. Furthermore, AACSB recommends seeking feedback from stakeholders such as employers (AACSB, 2001)

“Experts in the workplace” refers to people practicing or employed in a community in a position within the field of study in question (Randall, 1994.) In order to validate course content, recommendations and views of specialists in the field are needed. Randall (1994) reminds us “good judgments about the merit and worth of an educational product are based on evidence and the best evidence comes from reliable sources”. Recommendations and views of specialists in the field are needed. It is these very specialists that often spot new work trends before educational institutions begin including them in course curricula. Eisner (1975) also states that the scholar in a discipline of study should not be the sole valuator of content. However, post-secondary business administration departments must respond to the employment demands of the region, as potential employers for student graduates, so these scholars should be included as valuator of content.

The process described here can be useful in situations where it is important to keep programs and courses current with what is being used in the workplace. It can also be used to identify new content or practice in some areas. In addition, this process may be particularly good for use by a neophyte instructor whose main educational strength may not be the particular course in question but can gain not only informational data, but also networking ties to the local business community.

Methodology

A Retail Management course was selected to demonstrate the Quickulum Process. This course should contain content, which is truly accurate, current and comprehensive. Emphasis is placed on the currency of curriculum content due to the highly volatile and ever-changing retail environment. The effect of the information age, for example, has been enormous. No longer are the traditional bricks and mortar approach to selling and distributing items the only focus. Nonstore sales projections for 2003 reveal that 444 million dollars will be made by less traditional means. Electronic retailing is no doubt a significant factor within the retailing field, although original expectations may have been optimistic. Regardless, this demonstrates the presence of continual change increasing the probability that textbooks alone are not reflecting the fluidity of markets, the actual effects of technological advancements, and the entire array of issues related to retail management (Levy & Weitz, 2001.) As a result, due to the rapid changes caused by such variables as competitive forces, technological advances, economic trends, demographic shifts, etc., the content must be validated frequently by in-field experts.

Within the field of Business Administration, a process called "Benchmarking" is taught which is designed to help organizations conduct various comparative analyses comparing themselves with their very best competitors. Kreitner (1988) defined benchmarking as "identifying, studying, and building upon the best practices of organizational role models". Selecting the very best competitors within an organizations' field is then an important first step when attempting to ensure continuous content validity. The title of an article by Main in 1992, "How to Steal the Best Ideas Around", provides insight into the benchmarking process. For retailers, the benchmarks would be those identified to be the most successful in relationship to a specific, objective and quantified measurement of success such as annual gross sales. According to the Berman & Evans 2007 retail management textbook, the full-line discount stores for 2004 included Wal-Mart with \$289 million (Annual Gross Sales), Kmart with \$36,099 million, and Target, a division of Dayton Hudson, with \$50 million. These three successful major retailers serve as appropriate benchmarks for assessing the authenticity of retail management curriculum. In addition, an educator may want to consider other possible benchmarks such as strong local or regional organizations with a significant competitive advantage within one's service area. Texas-based, H-E-B Food Stores, for example, is one of the nation's strongest regional grocers with annual gross sales of approximately \$10 billion. Therefore, for this trial run of the Quickulum Process, the first step was to create a purposive sample which included Wal-Mart, Kmart, Target, and H-E-B Food Stores, selected as appropriate benchmarks due to their strong competitive positions quantified by annual gross sales data was the first step in the process.

How to approach these very successful benchmarks in order to garner their professional opinions was the next step in the process. One must appreciate the full schedules that management has in common, especially in the context of a very successful retail organization. Therefore, as the second step of the Quickulum Process, a user-friendly and short, one-page questionnaire was developed. The words, "Quick 5 Minute Survey" were boldly placed at the top of the questionnaire followed by appreciative remarks and instructions. A listing of topics from the current Retail

Management textbook, current research, and the professors own experiences were listed next to a 5-point ranking scale for the respondent to communicate the degree of importance for each topic. To conclude the survey, the following open-ended question was asked: “From your current perspective, what else should I be teaching my Retail Students?” This open-ended question provided the respondents an opportunity to suggest further topics that might add to the authenticity of the curriculum. In order to increase the response rate to the survey, which was personally delivered to each of twelve different retail organizations, a small gift was left with the survey along with the professor’s signed business card. In addition, the survey itself was also signed by the authors. The suggested method of returning the survey was through fax, although the respondents were welcomed to return via mail or call for personal pick-up by the authors

The third step in the process was that at the same time these surveys were distributed to benchmark organizations, 35 current Retail Management class students also completed the identical survey. These senior level students were included in the process in order to compare the responses from the retail managers to the student’s perceptions about topics they felt should be taught in a Retail Management course.

2008 Survey. Six years later, the authors wanted to ascertain whether the same course topics were still high on retail managers’ opinions of items to be taught. The Retail Management course continues to be a senior level course and the curriculum topics are the ones identified by the Quickulum Process of 2002. However, a new text has been adopted for this course. The authors repeated the Quickulum Process by identifying the top retailers in our local area, including the same businesses or benchmarks from 2002, but with the addition of Sam’s and Best Buy. A similar survey instrument was distributed to fourteen of the local benchmarks. The authors desired to discover if the same topics were still ranked high in the local community of benchmark organizations.

Findings

Eight of the twelve managers who received the 2002 survey returned them in a timely matter. The following list describes the topics selected by the participants and their perceived degree of importance:

Table 1: Survey Results (Year 2002) Ranked in Order of Importance
(1 = most important)

Current Retail Course Topics	By Retail Managers 2002 (N=8)	By Student 2002 (n=35)
Customer Service	1	1
Managing the Store	1	2
Human Resource Management	2	5
Retail Marketing Strategy	2	3
Pricing	3	4
Promotional Mix	3	4
Retail Consumer Behavior	4	6
Information Systems & Supply Chain Management	5	9

Current Retail Course Topics	By Retail Managers 2002 (N=8)	By Student 2002 (n=35)
Planning Merchandise Assortments	6	11
Buying Merchandise	7	7
Site/Location Analysis	7	8
Layout, Design & Visual Merchandising	8	12
Electronic Retailing	9	13
Buying Systems	10	10
Other Topics Suggested by Participants	Human Resources Inventory Management Local Demographics Morale Spreadsheets Time & Stress Mgt.	Expectations/Prep for Work Respect for Co-workers Field Projects/Real World Exercises Motivating the Diverse Populations Product & Profit Margin Leadership Skills Conflict Management Computer Skills Needed

In addition, both retail managers and students suggested additional topics considered to be important for inclusion in this class. The additional topics that were mentioned by more than two managers were Time and Stress Management, Human Resources, Morale, Spreadsheets, Inventory Management and Local Demographics.

The 2008 survey garnered the following topics as ones ranked high by all managers surveyed: Retail Customer Behavior, Retail Marketing Strategy, Human Resources Management, Managing the Store, and Customer Service. Additional suggestions written in by the survey participants included Time Management, Conflict Resolution, Coaching Skills, and Soft Skills. Comparing these responses to the 2002 responses, it can be said the top five topics stayed equally as high as before with the “soft skills” increasing in value eight years later.

Curricular Implication

The topics that received the most weight in importance were then selected for special inclusion within the course’s revised content. Although not all the topics were selected in the exact same order of importance, the top six topics selected by both the managers and the students were identical. These topics, listed in order of importance according to managerial respondents, were Customer Service, Managing the Store, Retail Marketing Strategy, Human Resource Management, Pricing and Promotional Mix, can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Topics Added to Revised Course Curriculum (Year 2002)

Current Retail Course Topics	By Retail Managers 2002 (N=8)	By Student 2002 (n=35)
Customer Service	1	1

Current Retail Course Topics	By Retail Managers 2002 (N=8)	By Student 2002 (n=35)
Managing the Store	1	1
Human Resource Management	2	2
Retail Marketing Strategy	2	2
Pricing	3	3
Promotional Mix	3	3
Information Systems & Supply Chain Management	4	10
Site/Location Analysis	5	4
Electronic Retailing	6	14

As a result, the professor incorporated the responses of these experts in developing the course content in direct relationship to the suggestions. A specific demonstration of the effectiveness of this effort was the inclusion of local demographics in the course content. Local demographic information was one of the additional topics suggested for inclusion by retail managers. A pre-test was first administered to the students to assess their current awareness of local demographic trends using data from the 2000 Census Report. When analyzing student responses on the pre-test, the majority of students did not fare very well. For example, estimates of the population of the city in which many of them live and in which the university is situated ranged from as small as 30,000 in population to as many as 2.3 million in population. According to the actual Census Report for 2000, the actual population for the city was slightly under 140,000 people.

An unexpected but yet obvious benefit created by interacting with local businesses is the result of initiating a communication link between the university and benchmarked stakeholders or creating a network opportunity. A number of the managers included comments indicating a high degree of satisfaction felt from being asked for input. In fact, two of the respondents actually volunteered to provide further input about their organizations; therefore, they were contacted and invited to join the class on campus for an evening of discussion relating to the retail field.

2008 Survey. When replicating the Quickulum Process in 2008, the authors examined the findings of the survey illustrated in the following table:

Table 3: Survey Results (Year 2008) Topics Ranked High by Managers

Retail Customer Behavior
Retail Marketing Strategy
Human Resources Management
Managing the Store
Customer Service
Other:
Time Management
Conflict Resolution
Coaching Skills
Soft Skills

Although five of the six topics from 2002 still were included at the top, the “soft skills” ranked high in the additional topic suggested for inclusion in the curriculum. Additional studies would possibly give us more information for the reason of the “soft skills” ranking.

Limitations

The following are potential limitations identified by the authors for this process:

1. Limitations include the selection of a limited purposive sample. The authors specifically selected certain retail chains which limited the number of responses that could be given.
2. The perceptions of students receiving the resulting modified curriculum content should be measured.
3. Traditional student evaluations may provide some additional insight.
4. Although the responses from in field experts may provide for effective curriculum validation and improvement, it will be essential to provide for further field testing and findings of the Quickulum: Quick Response Curriculum Development Process.

Conclusions

In summary, a comparison of the curriculum topics before and after the Quickulum Process indicates that resulting curricular revisions were designed to enhance, authenticate and validate course content. Furthermore, the Quickulum Process provides opportunities to increase the confidence regarding course content using professional and student perspectives. The professor is more confident in the content provided to students and students are more satisfied in the content and experiences received. Beginning instructors can form networking relationships which will help enhance their teaching especially in those areas where they may feel less prepared. Lastly, important external stakeholders including curriculum assessment bodies and our students potential future employers are given due consideration.

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