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“... with interpersonal and project skills for all”: Integrating Project Management and Organizational Behavior Instruction

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ABSTRACT

We explain the journey that led to our development of a course for all undergraduate business majors that *combines* the teaching of “hard” and “soft” skills needed in projects. In this class, we use group projects to provide a practice field for the project management skills (e.g., developing a scope statement, creating and assigning tasks, tracking and reporting progress) as well as the interpersonal skills needed for successful projects. Interpersonal skills taught are those typically found in an organizational behavior class, for example: active listening, managing diversity, managing conflict, communication, effective team meetings, and dealing with underperforming team members. We share our course syllabus, strategies for course materials and staffing the class, as well as outcomes and lessons learned from our first time teaching the course in Summer 2012. We also share our vision for further elements that can be developed to support our mission of “interpersonal and project skills for all” students, faculty, and staff.

Keywords (Required)

Project skills, interpersonal skills, undergraduate business majors.

INTRODUCTION

In sharing our experience, we begin with a brief history that explains how we came to develop a course for all undergraduate business majors (accounting, information systems, management, marketing, economics and finance) that teaches both hard and soft skills needed in group projects. We then share the course description and learning objectives, along with our strategies for course materials, projects, and staffing/teaching. The course is to be taught for the first time in Summer 2012, so in the conference presentation we will share outcomes; here, we describe the type of outcomes we intend to gather for the conference. Finally, we impart our vision of further elements that the School of Business can put in place to help us achieve the mission of “interpersonal and project skills for all” of our students, faculty, and staff.

HISTORY AND TIMELINE

The course we developed has roots in a broader undertaking by our School of Business (AACSB-accredited). In Fall 2005, a task force of faculty was charged to identify the cross-disciplinary skills that all business students need, i.e., general skills that we want all of our business graduates to acquire, regardless of individual major. This task force defined six such skills:

- Written communications
- Formal business presentations

- Analytical reasoning
- Group work
- Professionalism, personal ethics, honesty
- Data/information acquisition

The fourth skill in this list – group work – marks the beginning of our journey. In Spring 2006, the Dean formed the Core Curriculum Integration Team (CCIT), charged to recommend strategies for the integration of the six cross-disciplinary skills into the School's undergraduate curricula. CCIT developed and submitted its recommendation, which was approved by the Dean and faculty in February 2007. However, no action was taken by the Provost due to resource constraints.

In October 2009, the Dean sought to get this moving again. He formed a new CCIT II team to review the original CCIT recommendation, propose additions or modifications that might make sense given the two-year lapse since its approval, and extend the original CCIT recommendation by developing a 1-3 year plan for implementation. CCIT II enlisted faculty from the management department to help find a solution that would not interfere with students' ability to graduate in four years. Eventually, two hybrid courses, one combining the elements of a traditional Principles of Management course with an emphasis on oral and written communication skills, the other combining traditional Organizational Behavior topics with a teams and project management focus, were developed. In May 2010, the CCIT II recommendations and plan were approved by the Dean and faculty.

The goals, as stated in the CCIT II document, of the new course integrating traditional Organizational Behavior (OB) topics with project skills are provided in Figure 1. These course goals map directly to the definition of the "Group work" cross-disciplinary skill identified by the School in 2005.

THE NEW COURSE: MGMT 331 MANAGING GROUP PROJECTS

Information systems (IS) educators and project management educators have long called for more attention to the 'soft' skills needed in project work. Our new MGMT 331, integrating organizational behavior and project management instruction, represents a response to that call. Jewels and Ford (2004, p. 361) contend that the 'hard' skills traditionally the focus of project management instruction "do not contribute to success as much as the so-called 'soft' skills of good communication and collaboration and connecting with people at all levels of an organization," and this is reflected in recent curriculum guidelines emphasizing the importance of communication and team skills in IS undergraduate programs (Topi, Valacich, Wright, Kaiser, Nunamaker, Sipior, and DeVreeda, 2009). Ultimately, our new MGMT 331 course represents a "more balanced approach between hard and soft concepts" as called for by Pant and Baroudi (2008, p. 127), with the intent that each will complement the other and the learning of both types of skills will be enhanced.

The CCIT II recommendation defined the objective of this course in this way:

To acquire skills needed to work effectively in a group to accomplish a stated goal. These skills include "soft" skills such as recognizing and constructively managing individual differences, and "hard" skills such as developing a project task list and schedule.

In the course syllabus, we state: "This course is strongly geared toward skill development and acquiring task and interpersonal skills to work effectively in a group to accomplish stated goals." And we define these learning objectives in the syllabus:

- To learn and apply fundamental techniques for successful group projects;
- To become actively aware of individual differences including race, ethnicity and gender, and to manage differences in ways that are constructive and effective;
- To develop effective practices in completing one's task assignments;
- To develop effective practices for handling situations that occur in group projects;
- To learn and apply best practices for effective meetings, in the role of meeting leader or meeting participant.

New Group Project Skills Course: Student Learning Goals

➤ *Work effectively in a group to accomplish stated goal(s):*

1. The business student collaborates in the effort to establish and document the common purpose and goals of the group.
 - Creates a statement of scope, including definition of key deliverables and target dates
2. The business student participates in breaking a large project into a list of specific tasks.
 - Generates list of tasks that will accomplish the scope of the project
 - Identifies and documents task dependencies
 - Develops a project schedule (e.g., Gantt chart)
3. The business student participates in the implementation of effective internal and external communication practices for the group project.
 - Develops and implements appropriate internal and external communication plans (e.g., project status reporting), defining who needs to receive what type of information, how frequently, in what format, and through what medium
 - Utilizes appropriate communication and collaboration tools (examples: “tracking” in Word, and brainstorming with post-its)
4. The business student acts to minimize dysfunction within the group.
 - With self:
 - a. Identifies personal tendencies that may contribute to dysfunction in group work, and works to self-manage those tendencies
 - With a dominating team member:
 - a. Uses interpersonal techniques to mitigate negative effects that a dominating team member can have on the group process and outcomes
 - With an underperforming team member:
 - a. Directly communicates with team member missing deadlines or delivering work that does not meet requirements
 - b. Employs professional means of determining why a team member is missing deadlines or delivering inadequate work
 - c. Works with appropriate person(s) to develop and implement an action plan to get the work done on time and to requirements
 - Recognizes and addresses biases that may impede group performance
5. The business student meets his or her project commitments.
 - Clarifies the definition of a task or deliverable when uncertainty or ambiguity exists
 - Constructively and persistently works tasks to closure
 - Brings problems forward in a timely manner, including views on possible solutions

➤ *Contribute to the effectiveness of group meetings:*

1. The business student effectively plans and leads group meetings.
 - Establishes purpose of the meeting and who needs to attend
 - Arranges for meeting location that provides needed space, A/V aids, etc.
 - Prepares an agenda and distributes it before or at the beginning of the meeting
 - Manages the meeting time and group dynamics to ensure purpose of meeting is achieved
 - Concludes meeting by summarizing accomplishments, decisions made, next steps and team member assignments
 - Ensures meeting summary is documented and distributed
2. The business student effectively participates in group meetings.
 - Prepares for the meeting and arrives on time
 - Follows the agenda, and offers contributions at the appropriate time
 - Listens and builds on points made by others
 - Encourages participation from others in the meeting

Figure 1. “Group work” Cross-disciplinary Skills

The full syllabus is provided in Appendix A, though it will continue to evolve as we prepare to teach MGMT 331 this summer. The syllabus reflects key elements of our course design, including:

- A hybrid course design with a lecture/lab format;
- Lecture sessions addressing basic project management skills early and then focusing on organizational behavior skills geared for improving working relationships with others;
- The lab sessions will push students into group work, and assign students to teams the first week;
- Lab sessions will be utilized for team development activities that focus on developing project and team best practices;
- Each team will tackle 2 projects. In the first project, teams will learn and utilize project techniques as they also practice their critical analysis skills on two case studies. This project takes the team through application of all of the project skills taught (scope statement, task list, tracking and reporting status) as well as utilization of soft skills taught (e.g., diversity, meetings, providing negative feedback);
- Then the second project – the Case Competition project – has them use all of those skills again, culminating in a competition among teams for the best case analysis. This case will be drawn from a real world local business and representatives from the business will judge the team deliverables (the document and presentation) to determine the winner of the case competition.

Elements of our course design are in line with effective practices that have been noted by others. Breslow (1998a) encourages semester-long groups and recommends starting with smaller projects so students can receive and process feedback and make adjustments to how they operate. She also supports the utilization of some class time for group work, as it provides the opportunity for instructors to oversee the groups and provide direction where needed. Smith, Smarkusky, and Corrigan (2008) contend that students need the opportunity to practice project skills in an environment that reflects the real world as much as possible, and our involvement of local businesses in the Case Competition project is our way of doing that. We believe motivation to perform well and produce quality deliverables may be higher because students know their work will be judged by local business personnel. Our inclusion of individual reflection exercises is also in line with recommendations for teaching this type of subject matter (Breslow, 1998b; Mengel, 2008).

We concur with Richardson (2011) regarding the difficulty in finding a single individual with the background to teach both the hard skills and soft skills. For the summer 2012 pilot, we have a project management instructor participating in the class to teach the hard skills, and the rest of the course being taught by an OB instructor. We envision the OB instructors absorbing the project management skills instruction so that they would eventually be teaching the whole course.

Finding needed course materials was an issue. Textbooks on project management go too far beyond the basic project skills that are our focus in this course, and nearly all of them take the perspective of project MANAGER whereas we want to teach the students skills to be a good project MEMBER as well as project leader. Reputable textbooks covering OB interpersonal skills exist, but none include the hard project skills in the domain of our course. Further, there are few that focus on being a good team member, although a handful do tackle the skills needed to be a good team leader.

At this point, we believe we will use a combination of a scaled down 'essentials' book for the basic organizational behavior topics accompanied by a series of readings and tools gleaned from various trade sources for the team development activities. These are still in development, but we will share them and our experiences with them at the conference. We decided to develop the materials for the hard skill component. At the conference presentation, we will share the design of the project skills booklet we developed (its format and what it covers) and bring a copy for conference attendees to peruse. We have also identified a web-based project management tool that we believe is appropriate (in our view, infinitely more appropriate than MS Project for teaching these entry-level project skills); we hope to gain approval to license this software for students to use in developing and tracking their projects.

OUTCOMES FROM SUMMER 2012 PILOT OF MGMT 331

We will teach MGMT 331 for the first time in Summer 2012 (May-August). The instructors will keep a journal, making entries at least twice a week during the Summer 2012 pilot. At the conference presentation, we will share insights gleaned, lessons learned, and adjustments we intend to make going forward. We expect to have insights to share on:

- This course being required for all business majors;
- This course having content from multiple disciplines (“soft skill” OB and “hard skill” project management);
- Insights on dealing with administrative issues (for example, the School vetoed efforts to develop this as a team taught course using instructors from both CMIS and management, and there are pedagogical implications from financial constraints);
- Teaching both types of subject matter in the same course, when the instructor is not expert in both;
- Teaching both types of subject matter in the same course, when no textbook exists that combines the two.
- Our experience with the web-based project management tool, if funding is received to use it.

OUR VISION OF WHAT COULD BE

Our implementation plan follows the “prove and grow” strategy recommended by Richardson (2011, p. 21) in his discussion of project management curricula. Once MGMT 331 is running smoothly, we intend to revisit our goal of bringing project skills to all in the School of Business, not just to our students.

As in any organization, projects are how things get done in a School of Business. The hard and soft skills taught in MGMT 331 are skills the entire School of Business community needs – faculty, staff, and students. Toward that end, we envision two key elements of infrastructure to support the management of projects in the School:

1. An online resource center (website) containing best practices for managing projects

The best practices would stem from what we are teaching in MGMT 331 and would include both project skills (e.g., how to develop an effective scope statement) and interpersonal best practices (e.g., how to deal with an underperforming team member). This online resource would be utilized by business majors in MGMT 331 *and beyond!* Students would be expected to refer back to the online resource and their MGMT 331 experience as they tackle group projects in subsequent classes.

Faculty and staff can utilize the best practices described in the online resource to improve the processes and practices in their projects too. The website would be open to the public so outside organizations can see what we put forth as best practices and adopt the practices if they like – and know that students they hire from our School of Business are well versed in these practices.

2. A “Project Support Office” for our School of Business

Like any other organization, the School would benefit from having a “go-to place” for assistance and advice in managing projects. The mission of a Project Support Office (also known as Project Management Office) is *to support project managers in the successful launch, execution, and completion of projects.* Services that the PSO can provide include:

- Supply templates for common project documents (e.g., scope statement, task list, status report, project meeting agendas)
- Consult on how to follow the recommended best practices (practices described in the online resource)
- Assist in conducting post-project reviews (also called project post-mortems or lessons-learned sessions)
- Provide support on the use of project management software
- Facilitate continuous improvement to the set of best practices

The PSO could have set weekly “walk-in hours” and also be available by email and by appointment. It might be staffed by a faculty member and/or an industry person. We believe it would be beneficial for the PSO to have a physical presence, such as a small meeting room that could be designated PSO and used for the walk-in hours and appointments. The School may even be able to sell sponsorship of the PSO to a local company and put the company’s name on a plaque at the door of the PSO meeting room.

In general, the School of Business PSO could provide a simple yet rich mechanism for involvement from our industry partners. Our School has a Project Management Advisory Board whose members could act as project consultants through the PSO, and we might also try to involve members of the local PMI chapter, given the collaborative success reported by Poston and Richardson (2011).

We believe these two elements – the online resource center and the PSO – would provide a central infrastructure to support MGMT 331 and position us to reach the goal of “interpersonal and project skills for all” students, faculty, and staff in our School of Business.

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APPENDIX A. Tentative Syllabus

**MANAGING GROUP PROJECTS
MANAGEMENT 331, SECTION XXX
SUMMER 2012**

TEXT AND MATERIALS – TBD, BUT CONSIDERING:

- ♦ Managing Projects Large and Small: The Fundamental Skills to Deliver on Budget and on Time (Harvard Business School Press)
- ♦ Strengths Finder 2.0 (Gallup)
- ♦ Supplemental PM skills booklet provided through Blackboard

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is strongly geared toward skill development and acquiring task and interpersonal skills to work effectively in a group to accomplish stated goals.

Prerequisite: Business Student Orientation

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To learn and apply fundamental techniques for successful group projects
- To become actively aware of individual differences including race, ethnicity and gender, and to manage differences in ways that are constructive and effective
- To develop effective practices in completing one's task assignments
- To develop effective practices for handling situations that occur in group projects
- To learn and apply best practices for effective meetings, in the role of meeting leader or meeting participant

**XXXX SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
PROFESSIONAL CODE**

Faculty, staff, and students in the School of Business at XXXX are expected to contribute to a culture of integrity and professionalism. Our School's culture encourages behaviors associated with educated and self-disciplined individuals. Those behaviors include:

- ♦ Being honest;
- ♦ Being reliable and prepared;
- ♦ Being responsible for one's own actions and decisions; and
- ♦ Being respectful of all individuals.

CLASSROOM POLICIES

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Plagiarism –large or small, major or minor– is a violation of the University’s Academic Honesty Policy and will not be tolerated. Any incidence of academic dishonesty will result in a failing grade for the course. The University’s policies are available at <http://www.xxxx.edu/policies/1q5.shtml>.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

All projects are due on the date assigned regardless of attendance in class. As in the ‘real world,’ ***NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED.***

FATAL ERROR POLICY

Formal written work in this course is expected to conform to professional business standards. The term ***fatal error*** refers to technical errors in language and errors of form. As business students, you must practice professional standards of writing. The School of Business has developed the Fatal Error Policy which applies to all written assignments completed out of class. The fatal error policy can be viewed on the School website at (http://www.xxxx.edu/business/current/policies_forms.shtml#fep).

The following “fatal error policy” will be used in this course: Cases or writing assignments with more than three (3) fatal errors on any one page or seven (7) or more in the entire document are unacceptable and will be returned to you without a grade. **The assignment must be corrected and returned to me by the next class period.** Grades on papers returned because of fatal errors will be reduced by one letter grade. Resubmitted assignments exceeding the fatal error limit will receive a failing grade. Final cases or papers that are due at the end of the course, when there is no time for revision, will receive a reduction of two letter grades if the fatal error limit is exceeded.

One way of avoiding some of these errors is to pay careful attention to what you write. Another way is to use spelling and grammar software (available in our computer and writing labs); these programs will detect some kinds of fatal errors, but not others. ***Another way is to make sure you have someone else help proof your document*** (your fellow students or team members can help here). Another way is to write a draft then edit it into a final product well before it is due; this allows you to do a careful final check. Another way is to take advantage of the assistance available in the Writing Lab (<http://www.xxxx.edu/IS/WRITING/>). In the end, **you** are responsible for producing a document that meets acceptable standards of writing.

GRADED ASSIGNMENTS

Class Contributions (20%) Student contribution significantly impacts the quality of the course experience. Contribution points are awarded to recognize students who share real-life experiences, offer different points of view, ask questions for clarification or provide answers to the questions asked by other students. Individual contribution to the class is determined by the value each student adds to the class through participation (attendance is included in the

participation grade). Quality of participation (clearly insightful comments) plays an integral role in this determination, yet quantity is also considered (either extreme—too little or too much—is a detriment to the student’s grade).

In both assignments and class discussion, I use three ‘rough’ categories (based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning) to determine the appropriate grade:

1. Was the content of the comment or work merely descriptive—e.g., did the student only describe an event or company? This level receives a minimal mark.
2. Did the comment or work include analysis of how or why something occurred? This level of comment or work receives a higher mark.
3. Did the comment or work include, beyond analysis, an appropriately thought-out extrapolation to other companies, contexts, theories, or applications? This type of comment or work content receives, if well done, the highest marks.

Exams (40%) There will be two (2) formal examinations over the readings and in-class discussions/activities. These will be exams that will test your ability not to just know the material but also to be able to understand, apply and evaluate it. In the business world, knowing what something means is not enough, you must also be able to relate it to other things and evaluate its usefulness.

Group Activities (30%) As one of our course goals is increased team effectiveness, this series of group assignments will be designed to offer each student an opportunity to practice and improve their team skills while also completing a set of deliverables, including case assignments that culminate in a final group presentation. These assignments will be developed and fully discussed in class. More detailed instructions will follow. Grading will be based on both the quality of the deliverables (e.g., project work breakdown structure, end product case analysis document) and your group members’ assessments of your input and efforts. Therefore, group members who do not fully participate in the activities will not fully participate in the grade earned.

Reflective Activities (10%) To truly incorporate the experiential activities from the group project into your learning, various reflective activities will be assigned.

To recap, your grade will be comprised of these assignments:

Class Contributions	20%
Exams	40%
Group Project	30%
Reflective Activities	10%

COMMENTS ON GRADES

This course is intended to help prepare students to perform at a higher level in the workplace through the application of organizational behavior and project management concepts. Therefore, greater emphasis will be placed on the application of information than on memorization.

“C” level work demonstrates that concepts have been understood and can be regurgitated on quizzes and exams.

“B” level work demonstrates that concepts have been understood and can be applied appropriately to analyze workplace situations.

“A” level work demonstrates that concepts have been understood and can be applied appropriately to workplace situations in such a way as to influence the organization in a positive manner.

Grades adhere to this guideline:

90–100%	A
80–89%	B
70–79%	C
60–69%	D
Below 60%	F

WEEK-BY-WEEK PLAN

Week 1

Lecture: Introduction and Course Overview

Lab: The 2C (2 Case) GPS Project and establishment of project teams, including group introductory exercise

Our goals: Toward end of Week 1, explain that each team is charged with 2 cases, state the due date for each case deliverable (maybe Case 1 due Week 5, Case 2 due Week 7?) JEM begin instruction on Basic Principles of PM.

Week 2

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Basics of Project Management

Lab: Scope Stmt development
Case Writing Basics

WBS development

Our goals: JEM will push out:

How to develop Scope Statement, then starter Scope Stmt for 2-case (2C) project

How to develop WBS, then starter WBS for Project 2C

What they need to do to finalize their team's Proj 2C SS and WBS (final versions due day

1 Week 3)

Week 3

Readings: TBD

Lecture: More Project Management

Lab: Assigning and Scheduling the Group Work

Diversity Exercise (Reflective Activity)

Our goals: Reach approval of SS and WBS for Proj 2C; Work their Project 2C plan. JEM delivers how to track and report status.

Week 4

Readings: TBD

Lecture: More Project Management

Lab: Basics of Team Meetings

Our goals: Teams submit Project 2C Status Report; buffer for the PM material.

Week 5

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Teams Overview

Lab: Self-Assessment Activities (Reflective Activity)

Exam on PM material

Our goals: Case 1 deliverable due; Teams submit Project 2C Status Report.

Week 6

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Self Awareness and Diversity in Teams (Race, Ethnicity, Gender)

Lab: Group Debrief, including feedback on Case 1;

Share Self-Assessment Results;

Identify lessons learned and corrective actions to take in remaining 2C project work;

Group Decision Making Activity (Hidden Profile)

Our goals: Teams submit Project 2C Status Report, noting corrective actions they have decided to take.

Week 7

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Group Processes, Roles, Decision Making, & Leadership

Lab: Project Tracking and Communication

Group Roles (Reflective Activity)

Our goals: Case 2 deliverable due;

Introduce THE CASE for Case Competition;

Team SS for Case Comp due day 1 Week 8.

Week 8

Readings: TBD

Lecture: The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team

Lab: 5 Dysfunctions Activity;

Identify lessons learned from 5 Dysfunctions and Group Roles Activities to apply to their CC project.

Our goals: Teams reach approval of Case Comp SS; Teams work on WBS for CC project (due day 1 Week 9).

Week 9

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Communication in Teams

Lab: Debrief Case 2, Project tracking meeting with instructor

Our goals: Teams reach approval of WBS for Proj CC; Teams work their Proj CC plan.

Week 10

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Conflict in Teams

Lab: Conflict Activity (Red Green Game) (Reflective Activity)

Our goals: Teams submit Project CC Status Report.

Week 11

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Dealing with Problem Group Members

Lab: Team meetings with Instructors to assess Project CC progress, identify problems and find solutions

Our goals: Teams submit Project CC Status Report.

Week 12

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Active Listening in Teams

Lab: Active Listening Exercise (Reflective Activity)

Our goals: Teams submit Project CC Status Report; Project CC document and presentation due

Week 13?

Week 13

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Guest Lecture: Project Management in Action

Lab: Receive feedback on their CC deliverables

Our goals: Project CC deliverables due; presentations in lecture and lab.

Week 14

Readings: TBD

Lecture and Lab: None

Delivery of CC end products to client; top teams present, all teams attend.

Week 15

Readings: TBD

Lecture: Conduct Post-Project Review

Lab: Team Debrief

Lessons Learned Individual Assignments Due

Week 16

Final Exam