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Integrating the academic experience: An inter-disciplinary approach to the authentic marketing research experience

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Abstract

This paper describes the evolution of an innovative inter-disciplinary approach to teaching and learning in a University Faculty of Business. Further, it reviews the implementation of a series of unique, integrated and authentic assessments involving units based in the marketing, urban planning and business communication disciplines.

The project has used the production of Revitalization Plans for the University's campuses as the basis for integrating student teaching and learning. It has championed an approach which moves away from the traditional 'silo' methods of academic assessment to integrated, contextualised learning which develops both generic and discipline-specific skills such as client/consultation roles, business communications and knowledge in marketing, urban planning, and management.

The paper concludes by reflecting on the issues involved with the introduction of the interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning with the University.

Introduction

This project aims to create a system of authentic assessments in an area that is both familiar, and of immediate relevance, to students. Students work within a highly contextualized and collaborative environment as they strive to master the various socio-cultural, economic and political forces that impact upon decision-making in the business world. Working alongside and communicating with students from other disciplines is a deliberate strategy to maximise the overall efficacy of the project and to foster team-working skills that authentically mirror the modern workplace. The project also has the potential to provide evidence of learning for an outcomes-based approach to teaching and learning.

The authors identified the need for students to be able to communicate, collaborate and appreciate students' skills sets from other disciplines at the university level. This was in response to the assumption that it more accurately reflects the real world situation students would ultimately find themselves working in. A curriculum that is interdisciplinary presents content, skills and thinking processes, and assessments through exploring connections among the disciplines-in this case between marketing, planning and business students. Interdisciplinary studies aim to synthesize perspectives, knowledge, skills and epistemology in an educational setting and help facilitate the study of subjects which have some coherence, but which cannot be adequately understood from a single disciplinary perspective. To help support the argument and provide a theoretical framework academic literature was also accessed that covers action research and learning and authentic learning concepts used to solve real world complex business problems and scenarios.

Literature Review

There is a dearth of literature in the area of how to integrate learning successfully through an interdisciplinary approach that requires students to work collaboratively. However, the praxis of interdisciplinary studies is well covered in the literature. Ackerman and Perkins (1989) argued that interdisciplinary learning could augment, instead of threaten, traditional teaching styles. This heralded an important argument and driver for adopting an interdisciplinary approach. The Carnegie Foundation's *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989) did a great deal to help interdisciplinary curricula enter the educational mainstream. Interdisciplinary learning has become an accepted approach for curriculum design albeit rarely used in the higher education sphere - a decision that affects the potential learning opportunities inherent in this approach.

Auster and Wylie (2006) emphasize active learning as the application of theory and concepts considering student involvement in the learning process. Examples include formulating problem solving exercises, small informal study groups, simulations, case studies and role playing games (Heriot, Cook, Jones & Simpson, 2008). Classrooms provide the context for engagement in the process of inquiry predominantly through an action research process. Action research is a reflective process of progressive learning and problem-solving undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Students in this case work with others in formalised collaborative teams to help improve the problem-solving process. Action research is an inquiry process that balances problem-solving actions implemented in a collaborative context with data-driven collaborative analysis or research to understand underlying causes enabling future predictions about personal and organizational change (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Combining an employability skills dimension appears to have positive effects on learning. Job-embedded professional development such as action research more fully supports authentic learning and offers educators valuable insights into their practice (Elliot, 2007). In addition, Bates, Hardacre, Gant and Wilkie (1996) have found students report that higher levels of learning occur in non-theoretical areas and that it involves the correction of misconceptions about workplace "reality," new skills, time management, the development of self-confidence, and an increased awareness of career options. Magolda (1999) refers to this process as "self-authorship" as students incorporate their newfound learning into their existing self-concept and in turn learn how to develop their own perspective.

True learning occurs when these theories are integrated with hands-on authentic experiences. For example, situated learning courses are designed to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the authentic (Brubaker, 2011). Authentic contexts, settings and situations would normally be required to allow that knowledge to be applied. Situated Learning theory posits that learning is unintentional and situated within authentic activity, context, and culture in this case real life interdisciplinary collaboration in an educational setting. Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989:39) introduce the idea of cognitive apprenticeship: "Cognitive apprenticeship supports learning in a domain by enabling students to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity." Social interaction and collaboration are essential components of situated learning — learners become involved in a "community of practice" which embodies certain beliefs and behaviours to be acquired (Lave & Wenger, 1990). As the novice moves from the periphery of a community to its centre, he or she becomes more active

and engaged within the culture and eventually assumes the role of an expert. In this paper business students are tasked to work collaboratively with planning students using market research data. This presents an authentic activity involving interaction and collaboration with subject disciplines that are not usually familiar to their sphere of activity or familiarity.

Diamond, Middleton and Mather (2011) describe a higher education cross-faculty learning model that helps create a supportive simulation model for authentic learning. The model presented outlines how a simulated client–developer relationship provided a unique student learning experience - a model that was adapted for this paper. Importantly, the paper also considers the link between students’ experiences and academic theories about authentic learning; and concludes with a reflection on the benefits and limitations of the proposed model for the education arena. In this paper students acted as subject professionals and the academic staff acted as the students’ clients. As such the approach is a combination of simulation and problem-based learning, and provides a model for cross faculty simulation approaches to authentic learning. In the typology of simulations described by Lean, Moizer, Towler, and Abbey (2006) the model also fits into the category of interactive role-play. This approach is also consistent with international trends on best practice learning strategies to help place students at the centre of the learning process and develop teaching, learning and assessment strategies consistent with this approach.

The desire to increase the coherence between common views on epistemological and pedagogic issues, educational practice and the use of formative and shared assessment methods are all issues that are noted in the literature that need to be addressed (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). In practice this is reflected by programs such as the Stanford Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellowships_(SIGF) which allow high achieving students to undertake fellowships that transcend traditional academic boundaries and collaborate with faculties in different departments. (Stanford Report, March 21, 2011). Examples such as Oxford University’s Saïd Business School's approach also employs an inter-disciplinary approach, drawing on Oxford's strengths across a range of subjects enabling a more thorough exploration of important contemporary issues for the student population (<http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/degrees/dphil/Pages/Interdisciplinaryapproach.aspx>).

Research on interdisciplinary design also points to a host of positive advantages for a range of student learning in higher education. Offering an interdisciplinary format helps students realize the required behavioural and performance objectives for learning. The University of Wollongong (UOW) Australia provides a number of academic programs incorporating a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) component in response to the growing competitiveness of the graduate employment market. There has been a move away from traditional internship programs to innovative new problem-based learning models using cross-faculty models for the assessment of the WIL component (Corrin and Smith, 2007).

Interdisciplinary design

The design incorporates a series of stages which interlink and model as closely as possible the relationships between different discipline colleagues working within a project management team. At the time of writing this paper, stages 1 and 2 have been completed. Stage 3 is in the preliminary phase of development. The following paragraphs outline each stage.

Stage one involved students from a second year undergraduate unit in marketing research designing and conducting qualitative and quantitative research into current student's usage and perceptions of campus life. The data collection and subsequent detailed analysis involved over 50 students from the undergraduate unit. These students were briefed by senior staff from the Centre for Planning (the client). This briefing scoped out the necessary information that planning students needed from the research so they would be able to develop their plans.

The campuses are located approximately four kms and twenty-six kms from the capital city and provide offices and teaching space for a variety of University academic centres. The survey found that both campuses were considered by students to be unsafe at night, had inadequate lighting in outdoor areas, lacked appropriate food and banking facilities, and had poor public transport and parking facilities. In short, the university was seen as lacking the overall amenity that students could more fully engage with.

Planning students utilised this information as their project brief for their major planning exercise to revitalise the University and develop recommendations to improve campus life.

The plans developed by these students were in two parts and involved the integration of a range of discipline and generic skills. Firstly, students were required to produce a detailed analysis of the campus site involving socio-economic, environmental, demographic and planning-related information. The site analysis allowed student groups to identify any major strengths and weaknesses of the existing campus landuse and services. The second stage was the completion of a 5 – 10 year revitalisation plan based on sustainability principles for each campus. The two assessment items together produced as authentic a planning assignment as possible within the context of a university semester. These plans will be presented by students in a third year business capstone unit to develop a detailed major strategic business plan with recommendations for the revitalization project. These third year students will be briefed by students and staff from the marketing research and urban planning units as part of the project brief. Apart from the skills involved in working and interpreting information and data collection the third year students will also be exposed to the challenges of working with and alongside students from different disciplines within the university - a requisite skill required in the workplace. An appreciation of these skills is seen as one that while obvious is often ignored at the expense of other more prominent cross-cultural skills.

Student feedback so far has been very positive as it is seen as a unique opportunity to build and develop a more user friendly and customised plan for university life and study. Participating staff are mentoring students participating in the project and continue to give students access to rigorous and detailed marketing and data collection techniques, real life team work across faculties and advanced best practices planning and design innovations using the latest best practice research. Students' working alongside colleagues from different schools within the university offers real challenges, and learning opportunities that truly mirror the workplace. The project also offers an innovative approach to integrated assessments incorporating all stages of the project lifecycle and related complexities and challenges. Sample and questionnaire design, surveying populations, high level research skills, presentation skills and compilation of data and discussion with various stakeholders to draw up workable business plans are all demands made of the project participants.

Feedback from planning students has been overwhelmingly positive. Comments from the unit survey indicate that students recognise the benefits of integrated, authentic assessment items. Responses to the unit survey are anonymous but the following quotes provide an indication of the value students place on this innovative approach:

‘I really enjoyed doing the assessments as they were different to all my other units. I found that they were challenging but very enjoyable’ (anonymous, UTEI survey 2011). ‘The assessments put us directly into the job area of a Planner, giving us early knowledge and experience of what there was to offer for us in the job for our future (anonymous, UTEI survey 2011).

Conclusion

This is an innovative approach to inter-disciplinary assessments. From a teaching and learning point of view we often work in the so called silo style of management. Students and staff from different schools rarely get the opportunity to work alongside each other and may not have an appreciation for or understanding of different disciplines. However, this approach requires close liaison between lecturers in developing the assessments and integrating the learning aspects across different units. Students will then interact across disciplines in contributing relevant and timely information to assist with the assessment task in each unit. Students are able to work across many areas (e.g. research, customer perceptions, planning concepts, business costing and planning) and avoid many of the pitfalls of the ‘silo’ approached to managing resources, people and ultimately outcomes. It provides a rich context of job ready skills not easily learnt in either universities or the workplace. This project allows for students to view the development process of information gathering and analysis develop and flow within the University as it would in the business world. It offers students the opportunity to engage as both consultants and clients with different students throughout the university. A high level of student-centred assessments, professional assessments using industry experts, peer assessment both inter and intra faculty, student self-assessment, and performance reviews will all be used throughout the project life cycle.

This project can be extended in a number of ways. Firstly, the geographic area of the study can be expanded to include the local town area (particularly the area near and including the campus). This has already been identified as an area of focus for the local town development, with the view to integrating and utilising the facilities of the campus more for the local community benefit. In addition, the staff involved plan to offer this model to our regional campus at the completion of stage two. Furthermore, the project easily opens up opportunities for other units to be included in this process. For example, units such as Accounting, New Product Development, Marketing Principles, Organisational Behaviour and units beyond the business faculty. With careful management this project has scope to encourage inter disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning that will imbue in students a more complete and wide ranging set of skills in problem solving, research, project management and related disciplines such as sustainability.

In summary, it is an innovative approach that develops a microcosm business world for students that is real and can have benefits and outcomes that students will be able to experience and feel ownership. It utilises existing previously untapped resources, yet provides students with real world relevant experiences to real problems requiring an inter disciplinary mix of skills. Although not quite the Jekyll and Hyde of consumerism, students experience the dual roles of consultant and client, allowing them to appreciate both sides of the business exchange – both positive and negative. Within the context of this project business students can adopt distinctly different personas from one situation to the next and assume a role of different interdisciplinary personalities.

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