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Fostering Engagement and Learning in Students through Assignment Modifications During COVID-19

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Abstract

Critical thinking and innovative problem solving are two crucial skills for management students to develop in this fast-changing business world. These skills are even more relevant in today's turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Case analysis and simulation games are popular pedagogical tools to develop these skills in a classroom setting. Remote learning due to COVID-19 has made it challenging for instructors to use these tools effectively. While working within the same course timeframe and budgets, an instructor in a national southern university, opportunistically used the current context of COVID-19 to modify a written assignment for an introductory HR course and encouraged students to think critically beyond HR functions and its direct applications. Instead of a class discussion on HR functions being translated to an online discussion, the instructor created a pseudo-simulation of HR functions. Students were asked to select one out of four business sectors - higher education, big chain of restaurants, commercial transportation or grocery stores, and explain changes in the operations of any three HR functions due to the pandemic. The assignment required not only a deeper understanding of HR functions but their connections with other business operations and overall market – arguably a stretch task that forced the students to think beyond their textbook information and use the context to critically think and arrive at innovative answers. Findings suggest that the simple design change in the assignment enhanced overall quality and presentation of student assignments compared to assignments without these specific contextual requirements. Implications of this change on student learning and engagement is discussed.

Introduction

Instructors across the world struggled to deliver quality education to students after sudden disruption to classes due to COVID-19 lockdowns during Spring 2020 (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The challenge was more for instructors who rely on interactive and engaging pedagogical tools to develop analytical skills. Specifically, to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, students need to be pushed out of their textbook comfort zones. However, it is difficult to use business cases effectively online. The quality of class interactions also suffer in virtual portals (Dhawan, 2020). In addition, there are less visible issues like, a.) budget constraints across schools which restricts the adoption of new class resources (Garcia & Weiss, 2020), b.) emotional exhaustion of students and faculties alike due to health and job-related burnout. The challenge in front of educators is to how to bring student engagement back using home grown pedagogical customization, in quick time.

Students are better engaged when they can relate to the context; if they are able to play a fictitious or assumed role in a scenario (Sahoo, 2021). They are also likely to understand the complex problems better and get well equipped to find efficient solutions (Kim, 2018). The same

assumption works for detailed role plays and elaborated business cases. The basic assumption behind this paper follows this thread of thought - that if students feel part of a context, they will be better equipped to understand the problem statement and find answers using class learning due to the associated psychological investment.

This paper builds upon a case study of a face-to-face (F2F) introductory Human Resources (HR) course of predominantly minority students at an Historically Black College & University (HBCU) during COVID-19 that was transitioned online completely. The instructor implemented a few simple design changes to a written assignment to make it context-based, forcing students to think beyond their textbook understanding of the concepts. The impact of these changes was assessed by comparing two similar written assignments without and with design changes (pre- and post-online transition). Findings suggest that students can engage and learn better through contextual design changes, which works as a pseudo simulation exercise. The primary contribution of the paper is to provide a simple assignment design solution for student engagement and class learning problems.

Technology and Student Learning during COVID-19

Technology has helped students and teachers during the COVID-19 crisis through accessibility to tools and resources for adaptation & flexibility towards learning. It provides a student freedom from time and space constraints to attend classes (Dhawan, 2020). However, technology is not easily accessible to everyone resulting in an inequity of educational opportunities. Not all students have access to laptops and internet all the time. Moreover, not all students and teachers can afford to invest in new technical resources, which creates a disruption in learning for vulnerable groups (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Students experience decline in learning and class performance along with health issues. These challenges are greater for people of color and low-income students (Lederer et al., 2021). The unavailability of resources and associated challenges make it harder for students from minority groups to engage in class activities. Hence, in these situations it might be difficult for teachers to quickly adapt to technology-intensive pedagogies for a wide range of students that include vulnerable groups.

- **Simple Design Changes in Assignments and Student Engagement**

Although designing new technologically advancements to bring back student engagement is a promising idea for overall student learning, it simply is not possible for many student groups to experience parity in technology intensive modules because of disparity in resources and challenging work-life situations (Oyedotun, 2020). Therefore, flexible and creative solutions are required for at-risk student groups (World Bank, 2020). Streamlining teaching content with adaptive learning process and alternative modes of assessment can help (Oyedotun, 2020).

The instructor believed a careful approach in streamlining an assignment can be undertaken while not increasing the psychological burden on students at the same time. Providing students with choices and challenges in an assignment makes it more interesting as well as engaging for them. Also, it prepares them for a real-life outside class (Pandolpho, 2018). An important aspect of student engagement in e-learning is to make them the center of learning process and create a self-regulated process (Yengin et al., 2010). Written assignments designed keeping a student's work exposure and interests in mind would allow

them to control the process and play their role in the learning process. Connecting real life examples with curriculum is a creative problem-solving process which not just enhances the overall teaching experience but student learning too (Sampson, 2015).

Class Context and Transition Issues

One of the main learning goals for this class is to understand the basic HR functions (e.g., recruitment, training, compensation among others) and understand their applications in different scenarios. In a regular F2F class, this is achieved through use of a.) interactive class discussions which include their own work experiences, b.) in-class roleplays/exercises and, c.) small interactive cases. Due to the sudden transition to online modules in Spring 2020, the instructor was unable to use these tools effectively through virtual medium. An additional issue was students' limited financial ability to access further supplementary resources (custom apps, simulation software) to further augment their learning. The students communicated this obstacle to instructor and college authorities. Therefore, the instructor introduced a new context to the written assignment and made some simple design changes to engage students better without needing any additional technology and resources. The details of the context and design changes are given in Table 1. The instructor's experience of limitations of students in accessing advanced online technologies is validated in other recent findings on disparity of resources for minority students during the pandemic (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Method

- **Participants and Procedure**

The students of an introductory HR class of a southern HBCU were participants for this investigation during Spring 2020. They completed their first HR individual assignment before the class was made completely online. The second HR individual assignment was redesigned due to the online move. Most students in this class were seniors and worked part time. Some worked fulltime in night shifts. The instructor used their work experience profiles to select business sectors for class discussions. Most students worked in essential businesses (Transportation, Grocery Chains, Restaurants, Hospitals). They were spending more time than usual at work because of increased demand in these sectors, and new hygiene requirements. They thus had rich exposure to the challenges of their workplaces, both, pre-pandemic and the new ones during the pandemic. A total of forty-seven students completed both the assignments.

- **Analysis and Results**

Both the assignments have a gap of around 2 months. Final scores on both the assignments were analyzed using t-test for paired groups. Table 1 shows both assignment details. Although, the two assignments are not identical, the parameters on which students were assessed (e.g., 'Understanding of an HR function requirements', 'identifying gap areas between existing and expected function efficiency' among others) were similar.

<p>Assignment 1 (Pre-Transition)</p>	<p>Without Design Intervention</p>
	<p>Find two HR jobs available in the market. Analyze the role, education, skill, experience and other requirements of these vacancies. Collect more data from other sources and people to research the job postings. Analyze your current profile and skills, and compare them with respect to what is needed to succeed there.</p>
<p>Assignment 2 (Post-Transition)</p>	<p>With Design Intervention</p>
	<p>Select ONE of these sectors- higher education, big restaurant chain, commercial transportation or a grocery store.</p> <p>Keeping in mind the current effects of COVID-19 on your chosen business, how will you redefine (change/modify/abolish) any three HR functions for your organization?</p> <p>You can choose any three HR functions explained in your textbook (examples- selection, training, compensation, performance management etc.).</p> <p>Your assignment must show understanding of your chosen business area (example- supply chain, inventory issues for a grocery store) and its HR requirements. Your final submission must have at least three parts - one for each HR functions.</p>

Table 1: Two Assignment Questions Assessing HR Functions

Table 2 shows results of paired t-test analysis on 47 student-scores. Average score difference between two assignment is significant at $p < .05$, indicating improvement in performance due to simple assignment changes.

	Assignment with contextual change	Traditional Assignment
Mean	86.25	82.27
Variance	58.62	92.32
Observations	47	47
Pearson Correlation	0.26	
df	46	
t Stat	2.56	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.006	
t Critical one-tail	1.678	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.013	
t Critical two-tail	2.0129	

Table 2: Paired t-test Analysis on Two Assignment Scores

Discussion

While understanding applications of HR functions is crucial, they can be deceiving due to simple theoretical textbook definitions. Concepts in Functions such as recruitment and compensation can be quite complicated depending on industry and market conditions. It is difficult to teach nuances and the complexities involved without rich class discussions. The experience of business functions through internships or work helps in better grasp of abstract concepts (Templeton, Updyke & Bennett, 2012). The instructor used students' broad work profiles to redesign the assignment to supplement class interactions, and expected students to perform better overall. Results (Table 2) show that students did perform better than their first assignment. The improvement also shows use of applied individual experiences in the chosen business sector. It is important to note that two assignments though similar in purposes and skill set required, are not identical and may have caused some differences in student performances.

A secondary takeaway of this study is that most students worked beyond what was asked from the assignment and they collected additional data (interviewed store manager or asked colleagues

about the troubles) – an insight on what additional effects student engagement may bring to field learning.

- **Teaching Implications**

Instructors often struggle in bringing contemporary issues to the class to improve student understanding of the topic complexity. This study provides a realistic solution for class customization. In this paper, the focus of the assignment was moved from simply analyzing HR functions to analyzing these functions from the practical perspectives to develop and share insights of current changing business climate. Students show improved engagement by going above and beyond the usual expectations of their assignment. The average class scores show better performance and grasp of problem-solving skills as they were able to find HR solutions to unexpected challenging situations.

A broader outlook on student profiles and leveraging them in class curriculum and assignments may make students more involved and engaged. Aligning their profiles with market challenges will bring improved learning and problem-solving skills. It is also important to understand that there is recognized disparity in educational resources and opportunities for minority student groups and this disparity got amplified during the COVID-19 crisis (Garcia & Weiss, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Simple design changes in assignments empower faculty to improve student focus without making them play the catch-up game on new technological tools. Thus, these adaptations prevent students from feeling helpless, left behind or emotionally burnt out. The simple design changes will help students in most online classes even when the pandemic effects are over. A little creativity invested in redesigning assignments according to student profiles goes a long way in helping students through increased engagements, address lack of resources and developing practical and relevant problem-solving skills.

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