Developing an “Entrepreneurial Mindset” in Business Communication Courses: A Case Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case analysis of an attempt to integrate specific outcomes into a standing core class within a business college. More specifically, the concept of an “entrepreneurial mindset” is defined and applied to a sophomore level business communication course as a primary contextual factor for assignments and applications of course topics. The paper concludes by proposing a model for varying basic core courses to meet individual student and programmatic needs.

Keywords: Business communication; entrepreneurship; core coursework
Introduction

The study of learners’ expectations of various aspects of quality teaching has become prominent in the last two decades (Addison, Best, & Warrington, 2006; Ferreira & Santoso, 2008). As education is a dynamic human activity it is obvious that students, being the end users of the academic community, would be able to provide important insights derived from their experiences in the classroom (Cunningham, 2008). Such feedback can be interpreted at various levels of the scholarship of learning and teaching. These include generic expectations that might feed pedagogies across disciplines, as well as those regarding specific fields of study or particular educational settings.

Over the past quarter century, much research has focused on the concept of experiential learning. Kolb (1984) asserted that knowledge is created through experience. Merizow (1990) indicates that experiences impact interpersonal relationships, organizations and the overall socioeconomic system. Most experiential learning experiences are geared around the concept of not only the student and faculty, but also a mentor (Alderman and Milne, 2005) who helps to facilitate the learning experience.

Kolb (1984) established the experiential learning circle that involves four elements:

- Concrete experience
- Observation and experience
- Forming abstract concepts
- Testing in new situations

Kolb, Boyatzis and Mainemelis (2000) asserted that “integrated learning is conceptualized as an ideal learning cycle or spiral where the learner touches all the bases – experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting – in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Further, Kolb and Kolb (2005) emphasize the role of students in “self authorship”, or the process of constructing one’s own knowledge as a basis experiential learning. By developing their effectiveness as learners, students can be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning by understanding how they learn best and the skills necessary to learn (Keeton, Sheckley, Griggs, 2002).

Many previous classroom models were based on the concept of observation and experience as a means of demonstrating abstract concepts. However, the typical classroom experience appears to have been lacking involves the concept of “concrete” experience and also testing in “new situations.” Freudenberg, Brimble and Vyvyan (2010) contend that work integrated learning positively impacts both student learning and motivation.

According to Tellis (1997), case study research has been marked by periods of intense use and periods of disuse. Further, he indicates that “The literature contains numerous examples of applications of the case study methodology. The earliest and most natural examples are to be found in the fields of Law and Medicine, where "cases" make up the large body of the student work. However, there are some areas that have used case study techniques extensively, particularly in government and in evaluative situations.” Thus, the use of a case study as an evaluative tool is a common practice. More pertinent to the current research, Zonabend (1992) indicated that a case study gives special attention to a situation through completeness in observation.

Many classroom models focus on concepts of observation and experience or forming abstract concepts. However, short of cooperative education or internship programs,
very few learning models call for full development of the experiential learning model. Further, virtually no models seek to integrate the experiential learning model with the traditional classroom paradigm. The following case study presents an attempt to integrate the traditional classroom learning model for a business communication course with an experiential learning experience and provides concluding recommendations for similar initiatives.

**Method**

Yin (1994) presented four principles that should attract the researcher's attention, as they pertain to case study research:

- Use evidence as a basis for analysis
- Include all major rival interpretations in the analysis
- Address the most significant aspect of the case study
- Use the researcher's prior, expert knowledge to further the analysis

Using Yin’s (1994) guidelines, the following sections seek to meet these criteria for appropriate case study research.

**Participants**

A total of 22 students enrolled in a sophomore level business communication course participated in the pilot program/study. Because students self-selected into the summer course, no random assignment was possible. However, the gender split of the students was similar (12 male, 10 female). Two students dropped/withdrew from the course during the term, which yielded a final participant group size of 20 (11 male, 9 female).

**Pilot Goals**

The pilot centered on the concept of “developing an entrepreneurial mindset”, which is an integrated part of the mission of the College of Business within a mid-sized university in the Midwestern United States. The pilot was conducted during the summer of 2010. Within this College of Business, developing an entrepreneurial mindset typically encompasses four key, sequential, functions:

- Having a willingness to accept or “take on” challenges
- Being receptive to personal and organizational change
- Having the ability and skill to convert challenges to opportunities
- Applying skills and abilities to convert opportunities to outcomes

**Course Structure**

The pilot differentiated from the traditional course organization, in that it required students to develop small work teams of three – five individuals and to formulate their own “fictional” company. Initial steps in the team building process included team membership (teams were comprised of four-five students) and the development of a business, a business model, a mission and vision statement for the business and finally standard operating communication protocol. Students were responsible for identifying individual roles through job titles and the development of corporate logos, letterhead, etc.

Further, the development of the course and subsequent assignments challenged students with typical issues surrounding the development of a “start up” company. More specifically, students were tasked to deliver standard correspondence related to issues of selecting and retaining vendors and suppliers, interactions with customers and clients as well as to more corporate-oriented documents such as news releases,
meeting agendas, meeting minutes. Student presentations were also related to their entrepreneurial endeavours. These included news conferences, meeting scenarios, conducting training seminars, sales presentations and finally major group presentations of a business expansion proposal.

Observations and Results

A total of 20 students self-organized into five teams/groups of four students each. Because of self-organization, demographic variables such as gender, age, work experience, etc., were not used as a basis to create “even” groups. That is, the groups were not heterogeneous in nature. However, for clarity purposes, the five teams are briefly profiled below in Table 1.

Table 1:
Business Type by Gender of Team Membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Company/Organization/Industry</th>
<th># Males</th>
<th># Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tool Manufacturing Facility</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Communication Devices Retail Center</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting Consulting Firm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Marketing Firm</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting Goods Retail Outlet</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considerations for types of organizations related to several factors. Most notably, students tended to self-organize based on either previous work experience or future career goals. Within those types of fictitious organizations, students universally accepted job or position titles focused on future career goals and aspirations.

Several challenges presented themselves during the pilot course. For purposes of organization, these challenges are organized into challenges related to course goals, course structure, and “traditional” classroom challenges.

Course Goals
One of the primary goals of an altered structure to a “core” class for College of Business students was to insure consistency of business communication learning objectives across sections. This is a recurring issue for virtually any situation in which multiple sections of a course are offered. Because the course fits into the “core” classes required of all students in the College of Business, a guiding principle for the pilot was to ensure student outcomes were consistent.

An additional goal of the course pilot was to foster increased participation and enthusiasm. Through providing a more “hands on” approach, the researcher sought to motivate students and provide a more interactive learning experience.

Within this particular university, a guiding principle is to foster an “entrepreneurial mindset” for students and graduates. By allowing students at the sophomore level to design their own organizations, they were given a different vantage point based on standpoint theory. That is, by looking at an organization not from the eyes as a prospective employee, but the business founder, students were able to gain insight into primary business functions associated with a “startup” company.

One final set of goals deal with specific College of Business skills at the university. More specifically, this College of Business identified a clear set of skills and skill
development areas to be fostered through academic programs. Specific to the business communication course, two of the skills are fostered and assessed – these included written and oral communication. An additional goal of the course was to introduce students to two other skill areas: teamwork and critical thinking.

**Course Structure**

The course was organized around a series of both individual and team assignments. While some assignments easily adapted to a team format, others did not. Specifically, development of student resumes and letters of application did not align with group communication goals and remained individual assignments for the course.

From a teamwork perspective, students were able to easily collaboratively seek and organize themselves with “business partners” and develop companies, organizational mission statements and even organizational charts of positions and titles. Subsequent assignments related to composing organizational correspondence, short research reports and oral and written proposals easily fit into the “team” structure.

“Traditional” Classroom Challenges

Some of the challenges that impacted the present research are common challenges that are faced in the classroom. More specifically, the pilot included what may be referred to as typical challenges with teamwork. These included maintaining consistent group sizes and similar compositions as well as issues related to inter-group conflict and negotiation issues.

For this particular pilot, the lack of a consistent knowledge base of students was an issue. More specifically, because some students had inconsistent, and in some cases, limited exposure to concepts from junior and senior level marketing and management courses, problems arose with terminology, vocabulary, and concepts. Inconsistent understanding of financial, accounting and economics topics was also an issue at times.

Because the types of teams and companies that developed were so varied, students sometimes required additional coaching and instruction related to assignments. Thus, a problem of assignment applicability related to team development was an unforeseen complication.

Finally, the pilot took place during a five-week summer term. This is a much more accelerated pace than fits into a traditional quarter or semester-based system. More precisely, the course was held three nights a week, for five weeks. This provided little “turnaround” time and time for reflection and analysis in some cases.

Based on the experiences gained in this pilot and forthcoming recommendations, the following information provides a baseline model for varying “core” courses to provide contextual-specific learning opportunities for students. The possibilities for application of the model are infinite when one begins to provide different contextual bases to a basic “core” course, such as a business communication course. Example contexts might include any number of academic disciplines, such as accounting, marketing, management or economics. By providing those contexts, the business communication (or other “core” course) course could easily be channelled to provide specific skill development and learning opportunities based on student goals and needs.

**Model Development**

The present research is based on the four elements in Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning circle of concrete experience, observation and experience, forming abstract concepts and testing in new situations.
Concrete Experience
While the pilot was a simulated experience, it was still based on concrete activities and realistic simulations. Students gained experience in making and communicating decisions as well as experience in working in a collaborative environment. Certainly the fact that the pilot was a simulation made it less concrete than internship or co-operative education experiences, but student experience was a significant factor in the research. One student evaluation noted, “The course was really challenging because of the amount of teamwork, but was valuable because it was so applied.”

Observation and Experience
Observation was limited in the pilot. This is primarily attributed to the fact that the course operated on an extremely regimented schedule. With only five weeks to cover topics and allow collaborative learning activities, opportunities for sufficient observation were restricted. Students were provided sample documents and video clips of successful presentation skills, but did not gain sufficient observation opportunities. Through course evaluation, a common comment from students focused on a desire to have more opportunities for observation, modelling and reviews of sample products.

Forming Abstract Concepts
Students formed abstract concepts, but on a limited basis only. Again, the timeframe of the pilot was a significant factor. Some of the abstract thinking was focused on assignments related to new product or service development and subsequent written and oral proposals. Students overwhelmingly responded well to issues of course structure, with over 17 of 20 indicating they “enjoyed” the course structure and format. However, additional time for self reflection, peer reviews of course products and more “ideation” opportunities would be beneficial to the course format.

Testing in New Situations
Of Kolb’s four elements, this criteria is the most difficult to assess. More specifically, few educational courses provide a basis for application across different situations. In a best-case scenario, educators tend to “hope” for carryover of ideas, concepts and topics. With this pilot, one can certainly make linkages from assignments to “real world” tasks and responsibilities. Items ranging from resume development to basic organizational correspondence in the form of email or business letters provide foundational knowledge that will be assessed in future situations for students. However, the pilot itself did not provide those contextual changes or opportunities to assess transferability of learning.

The model is based on the application of six contributions in the development of a course structure. These include existing course goals and outcomes, academic context, business and industry, observations, student input and faculty facilitation. Each of these is addressed below:

1. Existing course goals and outcomes – In an effort to maintain consistency of outcomes and learning objectives across multiple sections of a “core” course, the primary course structure should maintain its primary focus.

   In this instance, the existing course goals and outcomes were related to the business communication course. Specific outcomes related to the students’ ability to compose professional correspondence (such as letters, emails and memos) as well as to write basic business research reports, proposals, news releases and meeting agendas, among other documents. Additionally, the business communication course included outcomes related to presentations, such as conducting meetings, press conferences, trainings, etc. Using existing course goals and outcomes helps to define parameters for what types of topics, assignments and outcomes an experiential-based course would employ.
2. Academic context – The context will provide the primary basis for designing the course to meet specific student needs. A useful way to consider this is to have at least one "section" of the "core" class devoted to each discipline. In the present research, one might have the following:

- Business Communication for Accounting
- Business Communication for Management
- Business Communication for Marketing

The critical factor within the proposed model is that students have course content developed in such a way that it serves to motivate. In the present research, students tended to select their team-mates, as well as their own roles, based on future career goals and aspirations. By focusing the sections of a base core course such as this by academic discipline, students would not only see the direct application of learning, but be more motivated because learning is more specifically tied to their personal and professional long-range goals.

3. Business and Industry – Adding resources and individuals from business and industry would help to make the class structure more applied, as well as increase opportunities for observation and modelling related to course topics and concepts.

The present research did utilize business and industry resources, but largely at the students’ discretion. That is, because of the varied nature of student fictitious companies and organizations, the resources required of each team led to limited abilities to have universally applicable resources. By implementing #2 above (Academic context), specialized courses would be able to share the benefit of mutually necessary and applicable resources from business and industry across student teams and groups.

4. Observations – Although observations would be present via student interaction with business and industry and faculty, observation and self-reflection should be integrated into the course structure. This will allow for students to learn not only from faculty and outside representatives, but to have learning experiences through interaction with peers.

In the accelerated five week timeframe, students had little time for personal observations. Observations were typically limited to peer reviews of group assignments and drafts of documents that were reviewed by the faculty member prior to submission of assignments. A more traditional delivery timeframe (10-15 weeks) would allow for more time for observation, and, subsequently, reflection, as recommended by Kolb (1984).

5. Student Input – Allowing students to assist in the formation activities that occur early in the course would create incentives to participate and increase commitment and motivation to the course and the course’s learning outcomes.

Because of the pilot nature of the present study, very little student input was solicited during the initial stages of the study. Ideally, students who have high levels of designing their own educational objectives and offering input into the learning process, would have higher levels of motivation, learning and educational outcome achievement (Keeton, et al., 2002).

6. Faculty Facilitation – Similar to the way that faculty facilitate the learning process in online courses, the faculty role in this model would allow for more management of
learning and learning activities and reduce the time spent in traditional faculty activities, such as lecturing students.

Again, due to the aggressive timeline of this five week study (and course), as well as the varied nature of students’ organizations, the course had a more traditional lecture component which was followed by dedicated time for groups to have “break out sessions” that allowed for application of knowledge, work on team projects, etc. Increased time, as well as specific course parameters (Academic context, #2, above), would allow for more specialized content during courses, leading to more facilitation activities for faculty and less general topics for lectures and course discussions.

**Conclusions**

Several recommendations apply to the current pilot. Additionally, the present research provides a basis for development of a model for varying basic core courses to meet individual student and programmatic needs. The approach of developing entrepreneurial skills through a business communication course is one that holds promise. Further, this concept provides a foundation for varying “core” courses to provide contextual-specific learning opportunities for students. Recommendations include:

1. Involvement of external individuals and groups – Using external individuals and groups will multiple available resources and options. Specifically, subject matter experts from other academic disciplines as well as representatives from business and industry will help to reduce the simulated nature of the course and make the learning experience more concrete to students.

2. An “open syllabus” – While this idea would provide some obvious logistical issues within the course structure, a potential advantage is that students would increase participation in planning and implementing an educational experience that would be more of a “custom-fit.” Conceptually, an open syllabus would allow students to have some degree of voice in the creation of a course schedule and assignments as well as sequencing of those activities.

3. Professionalism guidelines – Because of the varying experiences and accepted normative behaviours of students, clear professionalism guidelines must be developed. These could be developed solely at the discretion of the faculty, or might well work in conjunction with development of the “open syllabus”, in which students participate in setting professionalism expectations for themselves and peers.

4. Provide templates – While sample documents and instructional observation was present, it was certainly limited in places. Additional observation opportunities would provide an optimal learning experience. Further, specific templates could serve as means of conveying faculty expectations to students. Examples to demonstrate such templates might include a listing of the types of acceptable businesses students would create as well as baseline guidance on the development of subsequent organizational mission, values and objective statements.

5. Incorporate strategy planning sessions between students (individuals and groups) and faculty – Because of the variation in collaborative teams and their framework, one-on-one planning sessions between the groups and faculty would be a way of keeping teams focused and motivated throughout the learning process.
Overall, the pilot provided some application of various elements of Kolb’s learning model, but was not able to universally employ the model, nor more recent developments and practices in the field of experiential learning. The previous section used these shortcomings as a basis for developing a model for implementing traditional classroom learning with experiential learning activities.

Students were able to gain insights into an entrepreneurial mindset through the combination of experiential learning activities with traditional classroom instruction. By being placed in situations in which they were partially responsible for their own “Learning spaces” (Kolb and Kolb, 2005), students were able to gain insight into the entrepreneurial mindset’s key stages:

- Having a willingness to accept or “take on” challenges
- Being receptive to personal and organizational change
- Having the ability and skill to convert challenges to opportunities
- Applying skills and abilities to convert opportunities to outcomes

However, several key factors prohibited optimal learning. These factors included an aggressive five week course timeframe, a lack of consistent organizational types, missions, individual roles or responsibilities and others. By implementing a course structure based on the model advanced in the present research, students would have a more well-developed learning experience.
References:


