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Combining Cooperative Learning and Individual Client Work in the Public Relations 'Capstone' Course

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We had one fundamental goal when redesigning our "capstone" public relations course (the final course in the public relations sequence) at Colorado State University. This goal was to prepare our students, insofar as possible in a single course, to work successfully as public relations professionals.

It seemed to us that such preparation should have several components. First, we wanted to strengthen students' planning and problem solving capabilities. In addition, we wanted to continue to develop their basic public relations writing and production competencies, sharpen client and supervisor relations skills, and improve their ability to work collaboratively.

Integrating these objectives into a single course has not been an easy task. We have overhauled and tinkered with the course for about five semesters. At this point, however, we have developed a format that seems to work from the point of view of the faculty, students, and participating members of the local public relations community. We hope that reviewing our successes and failures in evolving this course will prove useful to others reexamining their capstone courses.

Constraints

The course typically has 25-28 students enrolled (we have an enrollment limit of 24 plus the usual hardship cases), and meets twice a week for an hour each time over a 15-week semester. A third hour is reserved as "laboratory" time, during which students can work together on projects.

When we began redesigning the course, two aspects of the course were taken as givens. Both served as constraints and underpinnings for the course as it evolved. First, the course would have a significant case study component. This was a given in part to ensure continued compliance with accreditation guidelines. More important, case studies are an efficient way to bring varied, real-world situations within a classroom's cinderblock walls.

Second, each student would work with his or her own outside client for five to ten hours a week. Typical client responsibilities include running the American Cancer Society's "Great American Smokeout" program on campus, writing press kits and handling media contacts for University Public Relations, and writing and producing newsletters and press releases for the county American Red Cross Chapter.

This client work component was retained for several reasons. Outside work had been the centerpiece of the course for years, and a strong set of campus and community clients had evolved. Both area professionals and accreditation teams had highlighted extensive outside work experience as a strength of our public relations sequence.

Most public relations majors have at least one, and usually two or three internships in addition to the client work in the capstone course. We did not want to weaken that aspect of our students' training. In addition, it seemed possible that we might achieve some kind of synergy if we could somehow integrate individual client work into the classroom experience.

We stumbled several times in various iterations of this course. The first problem was one that seems endemic to case study classes: how to bring textbook cases alive. Textbook cases, as R. Brooks Garner pointed out in Teaching Public Relations 16, are remote in time and space.

A more serious problem was that of critiquing and discussing textbook cases. While providing useful exposure to classic problems and solutions, such critiques are fundamentally a matter of second-guessing professional practitioners. We wished to use case studies, as business schools do, to develop problem-solving skills.

A cooperative learning model

Our solution here has been to move to a cooperative learning group model--i.e., having small group collaboration become an integral part of the educational process.[1] The class is divided into four groups at the beginning of the semester (I check with sequence faculty regarding student abilities to make sure each group is of relatively equal strength). Each group serves as an agency, handling three case presentations a semester. Cases are presented as formal client proposals, beginning with background and research and ending 20 minutes later with timelines and budget.

The clients and client problems typically are drawn from recent situations, such as Bristol-Myers' attempt to market formula to the consumer in the U.S., a U.S.D.A. public education program concerning pesticide costs and benefits, the negative public image of the Kuwaiti ruling family, and a local attempt to pass a school bond issue in a year that the teachers' association had voted no-confidence in a superintendent and school board. In some cases, groups present proposals for opposite sides: for example, one group did a proposal for Bristol Myers and one did a proposal for the opposing physician's group in the baby formula case.

If possible, newspaper clips are used as the basic information for the students regarding the case, although they are expected to do additional research. Sometimes other cases such as the PRSA Bateman case studies are given to the groups, and can be used to provide a dry run for national competitions. If I do not identify a current case study relevant to a particular course topic--e.g., internal relations--I use a case from a previous semester, and ask students to confine their research to the situation and time under study.

On a given day, two groups will present on the same case (making a total of six such cases each semester). I emphasize to students that the presentations are not intended to be competitive, in that both groups can certainly receive the same grade. However, presenting together does provide a competitive edge that helps brings out some very high quality work from our students, and makes for efficient use of class time.

Getting the group model to work--with the attendant group grade for part of the overall course grade--ran into some initial snags. Each group member (each group usually has six or seven members) is assigned a primary responsibility. Responsibilities include group coordination and budget development, media research, background research, communication strategies, evaluation, and visual aids.

The roles rotate with each presentation. Initially, one person would take primary responsibility for actually presenting the case in class. As a result, a few hard workers would carry the group over the semester. This was remedied by having each group member present his or her section of the proposal, with the group coordinator introducing the presentation and individual presenters. I originally thought this multi-person presentation format would be cumbersome and the result awkward. I could not have been more wrong: the presentations dramatically improved, occasionally approaching high professional standards. Student complaints about unfairness became much less frequent, and group cohesiveness and morale became much more evident.

This approach deemphasizes but does not eliminate the textbook case study. We are now moving to a format in which a number of classes are reserved for case discussion from a case study text. Four case readings are assigned, one to each group, and each group is given discussion questions to consider. Each group has half the class period to review the case among themselves. During the second half of class each group reports its response to the discussion questions. At the end of class I summarize key points and principles.

Integrating the client work component

The final, and in some respects most difficult, course component has been the individual student's client work. How, conceptually, should such work be integrated into a capstone course? Increasingly, it has become evident that many students need more than anything to learn to behave as professionals, not as students: to initiate ideas and activities, not merely to respond to requests and demands; to educate clients, not expect clients to guide them; to communicate clearly problems and progress to their supervisor and to me, rather than expecting me to somehow anticipate and prevent difficult work experiences.

The course now begins with a lecture on client and supervisor relations. Students are expected to develop work plans and timetables (submitted to their client supervisors and to the me), log their time, and submit regular progress reports. Every two weeks I meet with students in their groups to assess each individual student's progress with his or her client. If problems arise they are discussed with the group, so everyone in the group can benefit from a single student's experience.

I emphasize repeatedly to students that my assessment of their performance--just as in the working world--is based largely on their communication to me about what they do, the problems they are having, and how appropriately they respond. Grading is based very nearly as much on the quality of the students' reporting to me and to their client supervisor, and their ability in handling client difficulties, as it is on actual production and output. (This also helps compensate for the inevitable variation in the quality of the client placements.) The final packet they hand in to me includes work plans, progress reports, time logs, and memos as well as more typical public relations materials.

Finally, students compile a portfolio of all of their public relations work (not just materials from this class), and present that portfolio to public relations faculty and outside public relations professionals. The three core public relations faculty members team up with four professionals, and each team meets with six to seven students, one at a time, for half an hour each (I do two such sessions). Students receive immediate feedback and suggestions; evaluation forms are prepared as well.

This portfolio presentation gears our students up for the impending jump into a competitive job market, and gives us a chance to help them make the best possible impression. At the same time, we get a chance to get formal feedback from the professionals about the strengths and weaknesses of our graduates--an important part of our outcomes assessment recently mandated by the state. This outcomes assessment requirement is the primary reason that the rest of the core public relations faculty participates in the portfolio reviews. Each semester, several students comment that the portfolio presentations are the single most valuable experience they have had in their public relations training at the university.

The course is a complex one to organize and administer, and is a demanding one for the students. Ideally, perhaps, client work as well as case studies could be carried out in groups. Group client work might somewhat reduce course complexity and student workload, and increase the professor's control over the educational experience. Nonetheless, this course has finally emerged as an enjoyable, gratifying process for me and for at least most of our students.

Student course evaluations are generally more positive than before. More important, students are nearly unanimous about the value of the course; their complaints almost exclusively concern class time demands. As evidenced in part by these course evaluations, client evaluations of students, and informal feedback, the course builds a wide variety of student skills. Just as important, the course seems to build students' confidence and belief in themselves as emerging professionals.

References

1 -- See, for example, Johnson, D.W. and Johnson, R.T. (1987). Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning. (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

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