

# Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 20,1993

## COOPERATIVE CASE STUDIES EXPERIENTIAL, BUSINESS PROBLEM SOLVING TOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

The rapidly changing nature of the world of work requires college graduates to possess knowledge, skills, and attitudes far beyond those required of graduates a mere decade ago. For business schools it cannot be simply business as usual; old delivery systems tied to traditional areas of functional specialization meet the needs of neither American business nor entering college freshmen. A cooperative case study experiential approach is demonstrated which moves beyond functional specialization while simultaneously addressing student developmental needs in the area of problem solving. Preliminary results are discussed and more creative approaches to business education are advocated for the future.

### THE FORCES OF CHANGE

As the business environment becomes more technologically advanced and globally oriented, new forces are dominating the global marketplace. Management practices and organizational structures that corporations have lived by for decades are no longer effective. New challenges are creating new problems that require a different concept of the business organization. The business environment of the 1990s requires that companies be more flexible than in the past, capable of responding quickly to rapid changes with a lean management team working in a flattened pyramid structure. The successful coordination of information is increasing in importance. The ability to create unique products targeted at smaller, more selective groups of consumers in an international market is increasing in importance. A new employee skill mix is required to meet these challenges.

Change has also greatly influenced business schools. For the past three decades the story of collegiate business schools has been one of incredible affluence. The demand for business majors clearly outstripped the supply. On most campuses business schools enjoyed both prestige and political clout. Faculty became somewhat detached from the business community, and business curricula evolved into a pattern of conformance with standardized national norms. These decades of prosperity are now ending. With the demographic handwriting on the wall, the inevitable enrollment declines of the next several years are fostering significant changes in American business schools. The multifaceted approach of education and research based on the interests and preferences of individual faculty members is evolving towards a more strategic focus based on the unique competencies of the institution and the needs of its corporate and student constituencies. Detachment from the business community is being replaced by responsiveness to corporate concerns. The national standardization of academic programs is giving way to program differentiation on the local and regional levels.

### THE PROBLEM; CONFLICTING DEMANDS

Business schools continue to admit students less prepared than those a generation ago. Demands are placed on the faculty to educate the students not only in terms of the traditional functional disciplines, but also in terms of student developmental deficiencies. These deficiencies include decision making skills, communication skills, working in groups, setting goals and priorities, time management, etc. The importance of addressing these deficiencies is highlighted by their effect on student retention. If business schools do not retain and develop these students then the demands of American business for competent entry level employees will not be met.

Simultaneously, American business is demanding more of higher education than ever before; entry level personnel who are well advanced in their developmental skills while simultaneously possessing a firm foundation in their area of functional specialization. Yet the newly adopted AACSB requirements stress the need to include more and more perspectives consistent with the needs of American business, while strongly suggesting that no more than 50% of the students total course work be taken in the business school.

Attempts to conform to AACSB requirements respond to corporate demands, and simultaneously address student developmental deficiencies prove to be more and more difficult, placing ever-increasing pressures on business schools.

### A SOLUTION: COOPERATIVE CASE STUDIES

Cooperative case studies simultaneously address two developmental skills needed by American business, group work and decision making, while simultaneously focusing on content related issues of the discipline at hand. Cooperative learning differs from collaborative learning in two very important ways: (1) it focuses on learning structures designed to teach students "how" to learn in groups and ensure student-student interdependence; and (2) it emphasizes individual accountability - virtually all of a student's grade depends on individually completed tests and papers, rather than undifferentiated group grades for team work. Thus, students are taught how to work productively in-group settings.

In a typical business environment the group task is to solve a business problem. Unfortunately, most entering students have little if any formal problem solving skills; thus, it is imperative to provide students with a formal problem solving method. Such a method is usually based on the classical business systems development life cycle and typically includes the following phases: (1) Data Gathering to determine the facts at hand; (2) Problem Definition which includes assessing the problem from multiple perspectives (critical thinking), a formal problem definition, and determination of performance criteria for any proposed solution; (3) Solution Selection, including generation of alternatives, "SWOT" analysis, and selection of the "best" solution consistent with performance criteria; (4) Detailed Solution Design, which develops a detailed plan for implementing the selected alternative, and (5) Implementation in which the solution is put into action. Thus, students are taught a formal problem solving method. Employing the method, and working in cooperative work groups, students are given case studies to reinforce content issues addressed in courses, thus providing an experiential base for comprehension of the business concepts at hand.

### PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The experiential, cooperative, case study approach advocated herein has been employed in approximately 50% of the sections of the introductory computer course required of all students enrolled in Quinnipiac's business school. Pre- and post tests have been run on both the control (traditional) and experimental (cooperative case study) groups and results have been encouraging. Students have enthusiastically embraced the cooperative case study approach. Enthusiasm for the course is much greater. Student performance on standardized tests is significantly higher than the control group. Students feel the course is much more relevant to their educational and career concerns. Further refinement of the case studies will provide for more improved student retention and comprehension of subject matter by providing them with a sound experiential base for understanding business concerns.