STUDENTS ADVISE FORTUNE 500
COMPANY: DESIGNING A PROBLEM-
BASED LEARNING COMMUNITY

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This article describes the process of planning and implementing a problem-based learning community. Business and communication students from a large university in the Western United States competed in teams to solve an authentic business problem posed by a Fortune 500 company. The company’s willingness to adopt some of their recommendations testified to the professional quality of their final product. This experience gave students an opportunity to apply communication concepts to a business problem. They learned how to make vital connections between theory and practice and between shared knowledge and shared knowing. In the process, students grew personally and professionally.

Keywords: experiential learning; Fortune 500; group interaction; learning communities; problem-based learning

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING movement has long advocated active learning methods to engage students academically, socially, and emotionally. If students can link theory to practice, the thinking goes that they’ll be able to link theory and practice from one course to the next, from one discipline to the next, and from one life experience to the next. Yet as recently as 2003, Vincent Tinto (2003), chair of higher education at Syracuse University, remarked that “the experience of learning in higher education is, for most students, still very much a spectator sport” (p. 1). This article shows how to design a course to motivate competitive student teams to collaborate on a problem-based learning assignment to produce a professional-level product.

At our university, the College of Business and Economics and the College of Communications linked two upper division courses,
Advanced Business Communication (BUAD 301) and Professional and Business Communication (HCOM 333), to create a learning community that would engage students from both colleges in a partnership with a Fortune 500 company.

We asked Target, the 29th largest company in the Fortune 500, to present students with an authentic communication problem. They asked students: “How can we reach and communicate with the current generation of college students to find our future leaders?” To answer this question, student teams evaluated the company’s current campus recruitment strategy, benchmarked it against the competition, surveyed student opinions, conducted focus groups, and delivered an oral presentation, accompanied by a written recommendation report, at the end of the semester.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Learning Communities National Resource Center site (www.evergreen.edu), learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build these learning communities, with all intended to restructure the students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines.

Freshman learning communities often link an introductory disciplinary course with a writing and/or mathematics course. In such cases, writing is seen as a means of expressing and reinforcing disciplinary knowledge, creating a “more coherent whole for learning” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 69).

Most advocates and practitioners emphasize that learning communities “serve to deepen knowledge and understanding of the material” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 21), perhaps because learning is as much a social process as an individual one, and the social may well be “the developmental precondition for . . . intellectual engagement” (Tinto, 1997, p. 618). Indeed, the literature on group dynamics (Luft, 1970) indicates that individuals learn about themselves through active engagement with others. Individuals who come together to
achieve a common purpose reveal things about themselves that they hide in normal social intercourse or that they are blind to.

Luft and Ingram’s Johari Window, or model of “awareness in interpersonal relations” (Luft, 1970, p.11), contains four quadrants representing the four aspects of the self in relation to others. See (a) in Figure 1. As relationships develop through self-disclosure and discovery of others, the open quadrant enlarges. Growth occurs through feedback from others and through reflection (Caputo, Hazel, & McMahon, 1994, p. 103). In interaction with others, the blind self is reduced, enlarging the open quadrant or area of free activity. See (b) in Figure 1. Luft theorizes that

an enlarged area of free activity among the group members implies less threat or fear and greater probability that the skills and resources of group members can be brought to bear on the work of the group. The enlarged area suggests greater openness to . . . new ideas. (p. 16)

To create an environment that motivates students to overcome their blind spots and build on their strengths, many practitioners recommend that students be allowed to tackle an authentic business problem. Support for problem-based learning is grounded in situated cognition theory, which “holds that context is central to the successful learning of knowledge and skills from others” (Sherwood, 2004, p. 539). Brownell and Jameson (2004) explain the positive results of
problem-based learning by suggesting that intensive teamwork on an open-ended problem calls into play “the analytical process of cognitive learning, complemented by the interpretive process of affective learning, [to form] a solid base for skills-oriented [i.e., behavioral] learning” (p. 561). If students collaborate to solve an authentic business problem, they do more than study the principles of effective communication. They “translate their knowledge into practice” (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004, p. 611), often by developing “self-directed learning strategies” (Sherwood, 2004) that will inform future learning and behavior.

To ascertain whether problem-based learning prompted positive student responses, the following research questions were examined:

*Research Question 1:* Would the challenge of an assignment posed by a professional organization motivate students to deliver a professional-level product?

*Research Question 2:* In a competitive, yet supportive, classroom environment, would the dynamics of group interaction overcome one of the main barriers to student learning—lack of self-knowledge about their talents and abilities?

In linking two communication courses from different colleges, we hoped students would learn more about communication in all its dimensions than would be possible if they were to take the courses singly or in sequence. Not only would they be given more opportunities to practice their written and oral communication skills, but in working together, communications and business students would improve their interpersonal skills as well.

We decided to assess expected student outcomes through the collection of qualitative data. The professional quality of the deliverable would be determined by Target executives and by a debriefing of the campus recruiter at the end of the semester. Student self-knowledge as a consequence of group interaction would be gauged by student feedback throughout the course, peer evaluations, and focus groups at the end of the course. Although students were aware of our interest in publishing an article about this project, they were unaware of our specific interest in the connection between self-awareness and talent formation.
In this section, we outline the process of developing this unique cross-unit collaboration to create a problem-based learning community that would enhance student knowledge of multiple facets of communication.

Designing a problem-based learning community requires time and cross-unit coordination. Having decided to create a learning community in response to a lecture delivered by Vincent Tinto at our Faculty Forum in January 2005, we submitted a University Planning Initiative Proposal in March 2005 and received funding in late September that allowed us to purchase release time for spring semester, 2006. We met once a week to carry out the following tasks:

- plan how to identify eligible students,
- work with the assistant deans of student affairs to identify student orientation and registration dates and generate employer contacts,
- contact corporate employers,
- meet with Target personnel and agree on a game plan, and
- fashion a course curriculum that would facilitate student learning to achieve their goal of providing corporate heads with innovative and actionable recommendations

Of the three companies—Mervyn’s, PepsiCo, and Target—we sought to partner with, Target was the first to respond with a communication problem. We met several times with the campus recruiter and the vice president of Human Resources for San Diego and Orange Counties to set the parameters of the partnership and negotiate what each of us would bring to the table. Target proposed that student teams research and develop a comprehensive communication strategy for Target Campus Recruiting. Target would provide students with the following materials: job descriptions, diversity information, application packet, DVDs used for campus events, PowerPoint presentations used for campus events, list of events held at CSUF, and internal articles about Target. In addition, Target representatives would kick off the challenge in the first week of classes, provide students with opportunities to tour a Target store and a Target distribution center, make their campus representative available to students to answer questions, and provide other resources and
information. During the last week of classes, Target would provide two judges from its regional executive team and hold a Target-branded dinner event for all class members and professors as well as deans of the business school and communications school at an off-campus venue. The winning team members would receive $200 gift cards; second-place, $100 gift cards; and others, $50 gift cards. In addition, Target would provide us a grant of $2,000 for expenditures on items such as travel, paper, printing, DVDs, and so on.

To prepare students to evaluate Target’s campus recruitment campaign, we partially modified our syllabi, emphasizing key competencies students would need to carry out the assigned tasks that would allow them to achieve their strategic vision. Professional demeanor, leadership qualities, academic and field research abilities, and interpersonal, interviewing, oral and written communication skills were identified as critical competencies. Students would be assigned the specific tasks, as follows:

- researching the company and industry competition using library databases,
- conducting comparative analyses of company Web sites from the standpoint of job seekers,
- creating student surveys to determine job expectations and attitudes to Target as a potential employer,
- interviewing focus groups,
- evaluating the alignment between Target’s identity and image to determine its on-campus reputation,
- interviewing company officials,
- writing a recommendation report, and
- delivering an oral proposal.

Although we retained essential features of our existing courses, we coordinated course curriculum, dividing tasks between the two courses. For example, students learned how to conduct focus-group interviews in HCOM 333 and learned how to write up the results in BUAD 301.

One thousand business and communications students received letters of invitation to apply to the learning community. One hundred applicants were interviewed on campus in groups of 20 to 30, asked to fill out an application and explain their reasons for wanting to participate in the community, and were accepted into the program based
on their concentration, course work, past experience, and passion for the project. The opportunity to work with a Fortune 500 company proved to be the primary attraction for students who would not be fulfilling a graduation requirement by enrolling in an upper-division course outside of their major areas of concentration.

Students were required to coregister in Advanced Business Communication (BUAD 301) and Professional and Business Communication (HCOM 333). As Smith et al. (2004) observed,

> Having a pure cohort of students is important for two reasons: first, the students and their faculty become a community of learners having a common experience, and second, because everyone is taking both classes...thematic connection can be made and integrative assignments created. (p. 78)

In addition, courses were scheduled back-to-back to ensure “high rates of course completion” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 79) and to allow for a solid block of time in which students would interact with teachers and with each other. The administration cooperated with our efforts by agreeing to place a corequisite restriction in the course schedule, allowing enrollment by permit only.

Before the term began, we divided the class of 33 students into six teams. Because only six males and only six business majors were enrolled, each team was assigned one male and one business major. Each group also included one major in advertising, public relations (four groups had two public relations majors), and journalism. Three groups included an entertainment studies major, one a human communication studies major, and one an undeclared communications major (i.e., concentration not chosen). This balance of majors meant that each team possessed a range of skill sets and experiences the group could call on to deliver a quality product. Additionally, early group formation allowed teams to hit the ground running. As an unintended consequence, the competitive tension was extremely high throughout the semester.

**STUDENT PROJECT DELIVERABLES**

Based on questionnaires and focus groups, students:
found consistent negative attitudes towards working at Target in both the retail and corporate divisions....[Focus group] participants unanimously agreed that although each of them shopped at Target stores frequently, [they] would not consider working there post graduation, mainly because Target was thought to [offer] a low status job, not a career. (Diaz, Lucido, Romo, Stacks, & Virrey, 2006, p. 4)

In their final recommendations, students provided Target executives with a variety of innovative low-involvement and high-involvement strategies (Collins & Han, 2004) to attract students’ attention: advertisement jingles, creative ads, DVDs, giveaway bags, streamlined brochures, a scaled model of a recruitment center, a model bulletin board, back-to-school events, a direct career Web site link from the campus career center homepage, and new gold or silver logos for executives. Each one of the six groups emphatically recommended that recruiters wear more formal attire to campus events. The Target uniform of red shirt with khaki trousers signals low-paid cashier. Target executives received this recommendation with astonished acknowledgment. As one vice president ruefully noted, “To think we spend millions of dollars on advertising for student recruitment and they weren’t even getting past our dress!”

TARGET’S ASSESSMENT

Target’s assessment of the final group project indicated that students would be motivated to deliver a professional-level product if they were given a real assignment (Research Question #1). The groups’ final reports were forwarded to Target’s corporate headquarters in Minneapolis for review and their ideas discussed at a regional meeting of campus recruiters. Target was so pleased with students’ recommendations that the campus recruiter immediately began working on the following changes:

- changing the link from the CSUF Career Center page to www.target.com/careers instead of the main Target page,
- getting appropriate information to hold its information sessions at the Titan Student Union instead of the Career Center and changing the way it advertises and carries out events,
• finding out how to reserve a table on Titan Walk (a major artery in the campus quad) during Welcome Week and prior to career events to build buzz, and
• directing campus representatives who come onto campus to dress more professionally (no polo shirts). (A. Ueland, personal communication, December 14, 2006)

A follow-up interview revealed that the campus representative was favorably impressed with the positive effect of professional attire on students’ perceptions of Target and on their willingness to approach the Target job-fair booth to inquire about internships and careers. Student focus-group results were extremely helpful in understanding how students thought about Target as a brand and as a career opportunity. One student’s model of a Target recruitment booth even found pride of place on the recruiter’s office shelf.

The Target executive team was particularly impressed with the professionalism of student presentations. Among the qualities Target looks for in employees are presentation skills and the ability to interact with people at all levels. Students hit a bull’s-eye on poise and professionalism.

**STUDENT REFLECTIONS**

Student reflections demonstrated that in a classroom environment, the dynamics of group interaction would break down the barriers to student learning (Research Question #2). Peer evaluations and a six-student focus group revealed the extent to which students’ affective filters opened up to allow them to achieve higher levels of audience- and self-awareness necessary to becoming better communicators.

Small student groups allowed for intimacy, for people to open up, revealing their hidden selves. One student confided, “We formed deep friendships. We had a session where we just talked—told each other about ourselves—really private things.” As individuals reveal their hidden selves, the trust necessary to successful group formation increases, as does the appreciation for the ideas of others. This proved to be the case for one student, who observed, “I learned that my ideas weren’t necessarily the best ones. Everyone contributes something and after a while you end up with a big idea.”
Another student insisted “the dynamic of the group is very important” and suggested that “everyone was so open because everyone understood why we were there,” thus confirming the notion that problem-based learning increases motivation for the learner (Sherwood, 2004). It would appear that those individuals who achieved a better understanding of group dynamics felt comfortable enough as leaders to relinquish control. As the same student remarked, “I learned what kind of leader I am. Let people do what they do and bring it together.” Another student agreed: “Let people volunteer for things to do.” These are all good examples of leaders promoting collaboration to achieve consensus within teams. Students found, as predicted by the Johari Window, that decreasing the blind quadrant increased the open quadrant (Luft, 1970, p. 11).

Student groups also achieved consensus by recognizing the fluidity of leadership and follower positions. One student—a “spunky, competitive Type-A personality” according to one of her teammates—functioned as a strong leader in the first half of the course. As the deadline approached, however, another member of the team took up the leadership position, discovering hidden organizational and writing talents. She concluded, “I’m learning more about myself when involved with a group on a project I care a lot about.” The original group leader assessed her new participatory role in the following manner: “I tried to ‘listen’ more to my teammates; and when making a suggestion, I tried to exercise kindness and patience. However, since I tend to be an independent individual, Type A, I know I need work in this area.” Students discovered the mix of leadership styles and collaborative behaviors that were unknown to them when they first began participating in their groups. They experienced transformational leadership first hand and demonstrated the interactive leadership styles that motivate both leaders and followers to stretch themselves beyond what they thought possible (Northhouse, 2007, p. 2).

Coming to the realization of their own strengths and weaknesses was not always easy. Dealing with various personalities was also a source of irritation because some students were anxious; some were overachievers, whereas others needed constant reassurance. Appeasing the personality needs of various students caused stress for other group members as they struggled to deal with group members’ issues. It was extremely demanding to work on the task and promote healthy relationships
between members. Once again, this provided students with a realistic experience of working through stress and personality problems while moving toward completion of a corporate assignment.

Not only did students grow and develop through this experience, but teachers also were transformed in the process of creating an innovative new program. Planning required us to be open and receptive to each other’s disciplines, curriculum demands, and teaching styles. Once the term began, it was essential to be open and flexible to change as we watched students struggle with course assignments, schedules, personality conflicts, competitiveness, and other stresses.

At one point in the term, students were so overwhelmed by course stresses they begged to be relieved of an assigned research presentation. The research focus was dropped, and students gave presentations on some aspect of their personal lives. In this process, they discovered several things. First, they found out about others’ hobbies, travels, and experiences, further opening the first quadrant to others. Second, they practiced their presentational skills. Finally, team members were able to identify those students who were skilled speakers and use this information to identify the best students for presenting their final report.

Teachers’ blind quadrant decreased as we gradually discovered a competitive dynamic more akin to a business environment than to a classroom. The competitive spirit that emerged as the teams matured had both a cost and a reward. The cost was that secrecy and competitive behavior divided intergroup and intragroup team members. Because we were unaware of the full extent to which this affected the classroom atmosphere, at times it led to missed opportunities for learning. The reward was that students were highly motivated. All agreed that having a real corporate challenge made the learning experience more serious, authentic, and motivating. Students, both in the focus group and entire class, commented that working with a corporation helped prepare them for the transition into the business world and, more importantly, gave them greater confidence that they could meet corporate expectations.

In the final analysis, it makes sense for teamwork to be a key aspect of any problem-based learning environment because half of the employees in 80% of Fortune 500 companies work in teams (Ashmos & Nathan, 2002) and because affective skills are as essential as cognitive knowledge to future leaders (Brownell & Jameson, 2004, p. 560).
In a market-based economy that is increasingly competitive, locally and globally, students should be given more opportunities to learn how to collaborate professionally within a competitive business environment.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Table 1 illustrates the process of creating and implementing the learning community project, moving from the initial planning phase to the final one of feedback cycling into the system. Setting up the community involved the cross-unit collaboration of teachers, administrators, businesspersons, and students. Time, money, books, computers, supplies, and lesson plans are equally important inputs. In reviewing this process, we recognized how important it was to coordinate the involvement of all interested parties—administrators, chairs, teachers, students, various departments, business partners, and outside vendors—that resulted in a relatively smooth planning and implementation process.

Even so, in the course of the semester, student, teacher, and business partner feedback led us to modify the course schedule. Among other things, we cancelled case assignments, moved exam dates, and freed up time for students to talk with the campus recruiter and with us about their projects. Particularly as the deadline drew closer, student groups and group members required a great deal of individual attention in and outside of class.

It became clear that the curriculum for both classes was too ambitious, and greater allowances should have been made for students’ busy schedules. In the future, we would better coordinate the curriculum and focus on making assignments more manageable in relation to the final project. For example, instead of requiring each team to collect and analyze survey data, the class as a whole should administer one survey and share the results. This would have resulted in a more representative sample size of approximately 700 to 800 rather than 125 per team.

Additionally, a class size of no more than 25 students with five groups of five members would have been more manageable than the class size of 33 students. Limited enrollment would have allowed more time for teachers to meet with individual students and individual teams, particularly in the second half of the semester as the contest drew near.
Table 1. Input, Throughput, Output, Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input (What)</th>
<th>Throughput (How)</th>
<th>Output</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students, faculty</td>
<td>Attending classes</td>
<td>Written reports</td>
<td>Winning team selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning materials</td>
<td>Conducting research, surveys, focus groups, interviews</td>
<td>Oral presentations</td>
<td>Implementation of recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabi, textbooks</td>
<td>Working in teams</td>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>Impact on recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>Visiting recruitment events, distribution center, retail outlets</td>
<td></td>
<td>Student evaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target personnel</td>
<td>Writing reports</td>
<td></td>
<td>Student focus group</td>
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<tr>
<td>University support</td>
<td>Delivering oral presentations</td>
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<td>Planning</td>
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<td>Student interviews</td>
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CONCLUSIONS

The learning community was structured to build relationships among students, teachers, the university, and business practitioners. These overlapping relational circles reinforced the key learning objectives of communication theory and practice united in our two courses—audience awareness and professional self-awareness—that are part of a dynamic group learning process illustrated by the Johari Window. Students learned how to make vital connections between theory and practice, between what and how, between “shared knowledge” and “shared knowing” (Tinto, 2003, p. 2), predicted by situated cognition theory (Sherwood, 2004). The group environment provided students with an opportunity to mature both personally and professionally. Students felt their self-confidence was boosted, and, as a result, they were better prepared for professional challenges. The bottom line: Target adopted several of their recommendations,
demonstrating the extent to which students learned how to collaborate professionally within a competitive business environment.

References


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