Consultant Learning:
A Model for Student Directed Learning in Management Education

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Abstract

This paper describes a teaching methodology called “Consultant Learning,” a new method of structuring courses in management and other business disciplines in a way that empowers students and places them in control of their own learning process. The "Consultant Learning" approach turns the classroom into a laboratory for the free enterprise system, using price as the allocation mechanism for grades earned. Students determine their own grades by earning “consulting fees” by completing projects. The amount of consulting fees earned determines each student’s grade.

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Abstract

This paper describes a teaching methodology called “Consultant Learning,” a new method of structuring courses in management and other business disciplines in a way that empowers students and places them in control of their own learning process. The "Consultant Learning" approach turns the classroom into a laboratory for the free enterprise system, using price as the allocation mechanism for grades earned. Students determine their own grades by earning “consulting fees” by completing projects. The amount of consulting fees earned determines each student’s grade.

The "Consultant Learning" approach is built upon a significantly different paradigm from the traditional college course. Traditional courses operate on a system in which all students are required to do the same quantity of work and the quality of the work performed is judged and graded. In the "Consultant Learning" approach, the required quality of the work students perform is held constant at a very high level – “professionalism” – and the quantity of work students perform during the semester becomes the basis for grades.

Introduction

For many years now, the term “employee empowerment” has been seen in management literature. Management scholars have come to the conclusion that employees are more satisfied and become more productive when they are empowered to make significant contributions to formulating and implementing those parts of the organization’s strategy with which they are most familiar and with which they deal on a daily basis. (For example, see Britton, 1986; Byham, 1989; Denton, 1993; Frey & Williams, 1993; Rothman, 1993, to name a few).

Since the 1960s, the terms “student empowerment” and “student-directed or self-directed learning” have made their way into the literature on teaching. Education scholars are concluding that the more students are “empowered,” that is, the more they are involved in the process of

designing and directing their own learning experiences, the more they enjoy the learning process and the more they learn and retain. (See Ellsworth, 1989; Johnson, 1992; Lincoln, 1992; Newman & Smolen, 1993, to name a few). In one of the classic works on Self-Directed Learning, Knowles (1975, p. 14) stated that "People who take the initiative in learning. . . learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught."

"Consultant Learning" is a new method of structuring a course in a way that places students in control of their own learning process. This "Consultant Learning" approach turns the classroom into a laboratory for the free enterprise system, using price as the allocation mechanism for grades earned. Each student determines his/her own grade based on how many hours of in- and out-of-class work they want to devote to the course. For each project completed, the student earns consulting fees, and the total amount of consulting fees earned determines the grade the student receives.

The "Consultant Learning" approach is built upon a significantly different underlying paradigm from traditional courses. Traditional courses operate on a system in which all students are required to do the same quantity of work and the quality of the work performed is judged and graded. In the "Consultant Learning" approach, the required quality of the work students perform is held constant at a very high level and the quantity of work students perform during the semester becomes the basis for assigning grades.

In a Consultant Learning course, the quality standard is "professionalism"; that is, every written and oral transaction which students submit must be of a quality that a professional consultant or executive would be proud to call it their own. If a particular piece of work does not

come up to that standard, the student is required to rework and resubmit it until the work is professional. Students receive no credit for work that is sub-standard, i.e., unprofessional.

Accepting low quality work and simply lowering a student's grade for poor quality is the predominant assessment paradigm used in universities. The Consultant Learning approach proposes a different model for assessment – holding quality constant at a high level, requiring all work to be redone until it reaches that high quality level, and then grading based on the quantity of work that the student chooses to complete at that high quality level.

To put this measurement criterion of "professionalism" into more familiar academic terminology, the only work that is acceptable is work of a quality that it would have received an "A" grade in a traditionally graded course. Naturally, the quality of work for which a professor would award an "A" would be different in a graduate class than in an undergraduate class.

To clarify how this differs from traditional courses, in traditional courses "A" students do excellent ("A") quality work while "C" students do mediocre to poor ("C") quality work. In the "Consultant Learning" approach, by contrast, everyone does excellent ("A") quality work; the "A" student will have simply done a larger quantity of excellent ("A") quality work than the "C" student. Even "C" students get to feel the thrill of producing something of which they can feel truly proud. Quantity of work performed becomes the grading dimension while we teach students that mediocre quality is NEVER acceptable. Although it might be possible for one to contend that mediocre quality is acceptable from "rank and file" employees (a contention with which W. Edwards Deming, Tom Peters and many other management authors would disagree), it is unlikely that anyone would consider mediocre performance an acceptable goal for those who would lead organizations.

Theoretical Foundation

The Consultant Learning approach has its foundations in several teaching and assessment approaches. In the late 1960s, Benjamin Bloom et al. (1971) introduced an alternative teaching and assessment process for schools which they called "Learning for Mastery." They point out that assessment and grading in schools has long been a process of "weeding out" – of deciding which students at each level were competent to go on to the next level of education. Bloom, et al. (1971), suggest that this "weeding out" process creates generations of adults who have learned little of value to them from their education, who have a distaste for learning, and who are not trained how to educate themselves for the rest of their lives. They suggest that it is time for us to stop thinking of higher levels of education as being only for the few, most intelligent students. It is time to recognize that the "normal curve" is only a valid predictor of random events, not of purposeful activity such as learning. It is time, instead, to try to help every student attain mastery of those subjects which will enrich their lives, including helping them learn how to learn for themselves – the analogy of teaching a man to fish as opposed to giving him a fish (Bloom, et al., 1981).

A major difference between the "Consultant Learning" approach and traditional "Mastery Learning" is that "Mastery Learning" is a model that has to be implemented across the entire curriculum – it can not be mixed with traditionally-graded courses in a standard curriculum. The "Consultant Learning" approach can be utilized in a single course without completely changing the assessment and grading standards of an entire institution.

More recently, a teaching method called "Problem-Based Learning" has been introduced (Bridges, 1992) which motivates student learning by placing all learning objectives into "problems" or "projects" which students are challenged to solve, the solution of which requires students to teach themselves the material and accomplish the educational objectives. Problem-based learning has two major versions – "Problem-Stimulated Learning" and "Student-Centered Learning."

> These two species of problem-based learning are defined primarily by the major goals of the curriculum and the extent to which the instructor or the student determines the learning objectives, the resources (for example, references and relevant experts), and the modes of evaluation for each focal problem within the curriculum. . . Unlike problem-stimulated learning, student-centered learning emphasizes the goal of fostering the skills needed for lifelong learning (Bridges, 1992, pp. 7 & 8).

Consultant Learning builds upon "student-centered, problem-based learning" by giving students even more autonomy to decide how they will design and complete their projects, in collaboration with the instructor. "Problem-, theme- or topic-based learning can be a strategy in most teaching modalities but fits exceptionally well in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning and teaching styles" (Glasgow, 1997). The Consultant Learning approach then combines this student-centered, problem-based approach with a novel assessment technique that can be used in a single class without requiring complete revamping of the entire curriculum for implementation.

Consultant Learning: The Approach

In the "Consultant Learning" approach, students learn by performing "consulting projects." Each student is paid "on the books" a consulting fee of $200 per "consulting hour" for

their consulting time. They design their own projects. If an instructor has certain projects which he/she feels are so important to the course objectives that every students should undertake those projects, then those projects can be made mandatory for all students. My experience indicates that the fewer mandatory projects assigned, the higher the level of student motivation.

I provide an extensive list or "menu" of project options from which less creative and/or venturesome students may select. However, I provide a mechanism by which students may design their own projects; that is, they are not limited by the breadth of my imagination – only by their own.

A colleague who uses this approach in accounting classes uses a strict list of projects, in priority order. The projects build upon one another and a student must complete project A before being allowed to complete project B. Students decide for themselves how far down the list they choose to go. The important point, however, is that every project must be completed with "professional quality" ("A" quality) before the student receives credit for the project.

Students also earn fees for in-class work such as class attendance. I structure the "pricing" of attendance on an increasing scale, so that they lose more from each subsequent absence to encourage them to miss as few as possible of the class sessions.

Students are encouraged to read the assigned reading and prepare for class by use of a "call-on-me" list. Students sign in on a "call-on-me" list as they arrive for class on days when they are prepared to discuss the assigned materials. They are paid a $200 fee for each class day they sign the "call-on-me" list. By signing the "call-on-me" list, they are authorizing me to call on them without their raising their hands. Those who have not read the materials or who don't like

to participate in class don't sign the list and don't get paid the "call-on-me" fee, so they have to do more outside assignments to attain a specific grade.

Students determine what kinds of projects they wish to undertake and how many. Each project pays the student consulting fees. The total amount in a student's "Consulting Fees Earned" account at the end of the semester determines the grade that he/she receives for the course.

Students are encouraged to select specific topics for their research projects based on what will be interesting and enjoyable for them to study. In addition, since most of my students are juniors and seniors or graduate students, I challenge them to look at their own business education and determine in what areas they wish they had learned more. I spend office hours assisting those students who have difficulty coming up with projects to think of things that they would be interested in doing. In this process, I am a coach. I try to help each student succeed at accomplishing that student's goal, whether that goal is to earn an "A" or a "C."

In addition, I tell students that as they complete projects they are to compile the projects into a portfolio. At the end of the course, the portfolios are submitted to me and then are returned to the students to allow them to use their portfolios in their job searches to give them competitive advantage in the job market. The portfolio can be a tool to help a new graduate get a better job. Chappell and Schermerhorn (1999, p. 652) explain the value of students creating portfolios of their work "to demonstrate career readiness."

Since students are compiling their portfolios for their future employers, I am transformed from a judge to a coach, working WITH them to help them put together the best portfolios they can to highlight their abilities. As they think about projects, I encourage them to think about

things that will be impressive to an interviewer in a company for which they would like to work. In addition, I suggest that they think about things that interest them – that they'd like to know more about.

The Consulting Project Proposal

Before a student may undertake a project, he/she must submit a proposal to me describing each project and have that proposal approved by me. The proposal must include eight items:

1. The Topic – What is the issue, question, company, or industry that the student will study or attempt to understand? Defining a question in measurable terms is an important skill which the Consultant Learning approach helps students to develop.

2. The Rationale – Why does the student want to know this information? The better the student has defined what value this information has for their life, the more they will be convinced of the value of competing the project well.

3. The Research Methodology – How will the student attempt to find out about this issue, question, company or industry? Will they research articles and books in the library, interview business professionals, observe activity, etc.?

4. The Output or Report Methodology – How will the student tell the instructor and/or the class what they learned by doing this project? Will the output of the consulting assignment be a written report, an oral report, a written case, a case analysis, a video, a panel discussion, a debate, an exercise for the class to do, a role-playing exhibition, a song, a poem, etc., or some combination of several of these?

5. The Perspective and Audience for the report – From what role is the student writing and to whom is the project aimed? Student to professor, junior executive to senior executive, consultant to client, son or daughter to parent, etc.

6. Consulting Hours – How many hours of work outside class will be required to complete the project, including researching and writing a professional quality report? In a comprehensive syllabus I give the students examples of how to estimate hours and "price" their projects.

7. Consulting Fee – What consulting fee should be assigned to this project? Students are "paid" a fee of $200 per hour of consulting time.

8. Due Date – When does the student intend to submit the finished project.

By requiring that the students get all proposals approved by me before they are authorized to begin work on the projects, I maintain control of the process while giving each student the maximum flexibility to design projects that are interesting and valuable for that student. Students desire and require flexibility if they are going to use their creativity to become intimately involved in their own education. By the same token, as I learned in some of the earlier iterations of this process, students need tremendous structure or they panic, confused as to how to be successful in the course. The proposal system maintains total flexibility within a strong structure.

A second advantage of the proposal system is that it gives me control of what content students will be addressing in their projects. Occasionally I have a student propose a project that is totally outside the subject matter of the course. I ask the student to see me during office hours to discuss their project and guide them on making the project more relevant to the course content and topics. Although I try to be as flexible as possible in allowing students to take on projects that interest them, the proposal process does let me make sure that the project will advance the objectives of the course for this student.

Students submit their proposals to me by e-mail. I can usually respond to them within 24 hours or less, quickly and efficiently, using only a few minutes a day of my time to do so.

Proposals that are in the wrong form, exclude important information or which include grammatical, spelling and typographical errors are returned for resubmission. This establishes early the fact that excellence is required in all their written work. If the student has done a poor job of defining a measurable question or issue, I sometimes ask the student to come see me during my office hours to discuss the project. Usually within minutes I can help a student to define a

question in clearer, more measurable terms. After one or two such sessions of assistance, the student usually shows they have learned how to define a question by completing several subsequent proposals without assistance. When the proposal is finally in good form, is logical, and is "priced" reasonably, I return the proposal to the student "Approved," meaning the student now has authorization to perform the project.

"Pricing" projects is a challenge for students at first. I tell them that there are three things that should generally agree – hours, fee, and number of pages of output, if the output is written. I have found that the average student takes about 2½ hours of work per page of professional quality written output. That means that for a normal 4 page report (plus a bibliography that should include 3 to 4 sources for a 4 page report), the project would be worth 10 hours of consulting time, including reasonable library research, and should pay $2,000 (at $200 per hour).

I tell students that if there is some reason why a particular project will be especially research intensive with a small output, it is possible for this relationship to be different. However, I tell them that I will expect the relationship between pages of professional quality output, consulting hours devoted to the project, and the consulting fee to approximate this relationship of 1 page equals 2½ hours which equals $500 unless they explain in the proposal why they anticipate a different relationship.

One of the most difficult judgements is attaching fees and consulting hours to projects whose report/output method is other than a written report. Although students can choose to make the output of their projects take the form of a written report, an oral report, a written case, a case analysis, a video, a panel discussion, a debate, an exercise for the class to do, a role-playing exhibition, a song, a poem, etc., in actuality 95% of all projects submitted to me in the past 5

years have been submitted in written form. Therefore, the "$500 per page" rule works for the great majority of projects.

For those students who choose to use some other form of report/output, I simply use personal judgement as to whether I believe that the number of hours and the fee that the student has requested in their proposal sounds reasonable for the task they are planning to do. If not, I counsel with the student and we negotiate a fee that the student feels is fair and that I feel is justified by the work entailed in the project. I do tend to be more lenient with non-written projects in order to encourage students who are attempting to do something more creative.

Sometimes, a student finds that they want to change the original proposal/contract after they have begun work on the project. The student may come see me at any time to renegotiate a proposal. Recognizing the difficulty students have in estimating hours before beginning a project, I am very flexible in allowing students to modify their proposals while working on projects.

"Consulting hours" is a proxy for difficulty of the project. The more difficult and challenging the project appears to be, the more "consulting hours" I accept and the higher the fee is for completing that project.

The Consulting Project

When I approve the proposal, I sign it (in e-mail by writing APPROVED and putting my electronic signature on it) and return it to the student. The student prints out the "signed" proposal/contract and attaches it to the finished project when it is submitted so I can judge the output within the context of the proposal/contract.

Once the proposal is approved, the student undertakes the project. If they run into difficulty along the way, I expect them to come to see me or to utilize the other resources of the university such as the writing center, the media center, the reference desk at the library, etc.

When the student has completed a project, they submit the output of their research (or present it, if it is a non-written report such as an oral report, video, etc.), along with the original signed proposal/contract. The criterion for acceptance is that the report (written, oral, video, etc.) be a "professional" job, one that a professional consultant or executive would be proud to call his/her own (within the technological limits of the equipment available) and one that I would be proud to show to a professional colleague and claim the student as my own. Another way of judging the quality requirements is to say that the project would have to be of the quality that it would have earned an "A" in a traditionally graded course.

If the project is judged NOT to be of "professional quality," it is returned unsigned with "rewrite and resubmit," "redo," or "see me" written on it, along with comments on how it can be made into a professional quality report. The student must submit a professional quality output to receive any compensation. There is no partial compensation; students earn the agreed-upon fee or nothing. When a rewrite is submitted, the student turns in the proposal along with all previous drafts along with the current draft. That way I have before me the proposal and all my notes to the student on prior drafts so I can see if they did what I asked.

When the project is judged to be of "professional quality," I write "PAID $2,000" (or whatever amount was agreed upon in the original proposal) on the cover sheet on the top of the report (or on the proposal if the report is not written), I sign it and return it to the student, like a check or voucher for payment. Having worked hard to create a project of "professional" quality,

students tell me that receiving “paid” on a project is as great as a rave notice, because they know that anything less than excellence would not have been accepted.

Evaluating projects that are submitted in non-written form is more challenging. If a student gives an oral report that is sub-standard, I require them to sign up to do at least one more oral report before the end of the semester and to get some coaching on how to give a professional quality oral report, either from me or someone else. If they show in their second report that they have corrected the shortcomings of the first oral report, I then “pay” for both reports. I have seldom had to use this, however, because most of the students submit their projects in written form and those who don’t are so motivated to do something else that they generally do it quite well. I have had videos, a poem and a song submitted to me in various sections and all were excellent quality work. Had they not been, I would have worked with the student as a coach to help them to produce an excellent quality output.

Final Grading

Near the end of the semester, students prepare their portfolios. During the semester I keep no records. I simply sign projects as “Paid” and return them to students. It is their responsibility to keep up with their projects until they place them in their portfolios and submit their entire portfolios to me for “payment.”

Each student submits a portfolio. The first pages in the portfolio are two accounting sheets that list everything for which the student should be paid, one that lists classes attended and “call-on-me” sheets signed, and one that lists projects completed. At the bottom of the last

accounting sheet is a place for the student to put the total amount earned and the grade they should receive.

There are no disagreements on grades since students acknowledge exactly what grade they have earned on the accounting sheet and back up their earnings with the projects inside the portfolio. All I must do is verify that all the projects in the portfolio have my signature on them, that the student's record of attendance fees earned agrees with my attendance records, and that the paid projects in the portfolio agree with the amounts shown on the accounting sheet.

Grades are based on how much the student has earned. For example, in my undergraduate "Small Business Management" course, $25,000 earns an "A," $23,000 earns an "A-," $21,000 earns a "B+," $19,000 earns a "B," etc. In my MBA policy class, the cut off is $30,000 for an "A," $28,000 for an "A-," etc.

Context of the Approach

I have used the Consultant Learning approach in several management courses, including Strategic Management and Policy, Organization Behavior, Organization Theory, and most recently in two management electives, Small Business Management and Management in the Family Business. I have used it for upper-division undergraduates and for MBA courses.

During class time, I use a mixture of approaches, including lecture discussion of the text book and additional readings, guest speakers, class exercises, and discussion of video cases and/or movie clips. In the Small Business Management class, the students are required for one of their projects to complete a small business simulation outside of class, and some class time is spent discussing the simulation and how they performed.

The kinds of projects that I include in the "menu" of items from which the students can select projects will vary somewhat with the course, but examples that are basically generalizable to all the management course I teach include executive summaries of important books in the subject (I give a list of examples), a resume and cover letter project, case analyses, and current event article evaluations. In Small Business Management students can form a team to do a strategic analysis of a real-world company, interview small business owners and write reports on what they learned from interviewing the owners, and all are required to complete a small business simulation and write a report on what they learned from the experience. In Family Business, they can do a Genogram of their family and/or a Family Business History of their family's business or another family-owned business, "situation analyses" of family-owned businesses in crisis in the news, or work with a family business to begin discussion of a succession plan for the business, evaluate family business cases, or write a case based on their family's business or another family-owned business.

The major skills that the students are learning include defining a question in researchable terms, identifying information sources, collecting information, organizing that information into a readable report, and writing a report that will be useful to others. Students learn these skills by doing them with guidance from me, including discussions in class about how to find information on topics, comments from me written on their projects indicating what needs to be done to them, and one-on-one coaching during my office hours for those who need special help.

An Example

One way to see how the system motivates students is through an extreme example. One undergraduate student came to my office several weeks into the semester a few semesters ago and told me that he couldn't think of any projects to do – could I help?

I asked him what part of business he was most interested in – finance, accounting, marketing, etc. He answered, "I'm not interested in business at all – the only reason I'm a business major is because my dad said he wouldn't pay my tuition unless I majored in business."

So I asked him what he likes to do. He said, "I like to surf." This is not too unusual given our Pacific Ocean location, but he was more blatant than most in admitting it. So I next asked him what kind of surfboard he liked to use. He answered with a long discussion of the advantages of long boards versus short boards and heavy boards versus light boards. I suggested that he do a project on surfboard manufacturing. "That's boring," he replied.

I next asked him where he got his surfboard. He told me the name of the shop and I asked him if there was anything else in the shop besides surfboards. "Sure," he said. "There were wet suits, boogy boards, scuba gear – lots of stuff." I asked if there was any reason he could think of why all the rest of that stuff was there. Was it possible to have a surf shop with only surfboards? What is the ideal product mix for a surf shop? "That's pretty boring, too," he replied.

I'll admit I was beginning to get exasperated at this point, but I persevered. I asked him <u>where</u> he surfed. He said South America, Australia, South Africa. It turns out he was not just a casual surfer but was an internationally ranked amateur competitive surfer! I said, "Oh, in other words, to surf you have to be in an ocean?"

Suddenly my office got totally quiet for 30 seconds or more. He stared off into space. "Gee," he said, "they have those wave machines that will make a wave in a pool. I wonder if they'll make a wave big enough to surf on?" "I don't know; what to you think?" I said.

Questions tumbled from him. "I wonder how many people you'd have to be able to have surfing at a time to pay for the pool? I wonder if you could teach lessons? I wonder if you could build a whole theme park like Disneyland around a surfing theme and put it someplace like Phoenix?" To each question I said, "I don't know; what do you think?" Finally he looked at me and said, "I think I know what I want to do my projects on this semester."

I won't try to claim that his struggling efforts to relearn his previously taken but ignored finance, marketing, and accounting courses in that one semester in order to do a feasibility study on his theme park idea resulted in a world class feasibility study. But I'll bet that student learned more about business, finance, marketing, entrepreneurship, negotiations, and management than he had learned in all his prior courses combined. Why? Because he was excited about the learning because he was learning something that he wanted to know – something that made a difference to HIM!

Student Reaction

Over time, an instructor develops a reputation for using this approach. The word gets around the student body quickly. Students self-select – those who like freedom and enjoy being able to do something creative in a course tend to seek out these courses. Those who want to do exactly what they are told and prefer being graded based on exams rather than written projects avoid these courses.

My students rave about this approach! In student course evaluations, the courses I teach using this approach invariably are rated with the highest rating possible under our rating system. The student's comments on the unstructured questions are even more telling.

In answer to the question, "What did you like best about this course?" more than 75% of the students in every class make specific written comments that they loved the Consultant Learning Approach. Typical answers include: "I love being able to decide what I want to do my projects on;" "I get to decide what is most important to me and spend my time on those things;" "I get to set my own schedule and my own deadlines."

In answer to the question "What did you like least about this course?" many students make comments like: "Nothing -- keep it just as it is." When they do have negative comments to make, the comments usually concern the students' ability to procrastinate, such as: "I didn't like that there were no deadlines – it was too easy to procrastinate."

Benefits and Drawbacks to Consultant Learning

Grade Distribution

One "negative" that some of my colleagues complain about is that students in my courses earn an inordinate number of "A"s. This is "grade inflation" they claim. I respond by saying that I would be willing to bet that if any professor in the business school graded any one of the "A" portfolios from students in my class, they would agree that the student should receive an "A" for that quantity of work of that quality. If that is true, then this is not an example of grade inflation but of motivating students to a higher level of output.

Why is it that a larger percentage of students are putting forth the effort necessary to get "A"s in my class than in other classes? I would say there are at least two reasons.

First, the students are working on learning things that they truly want to know. When one student does an industry structure analysis of the wireless communications industry, it is because he has an interest in working in the wireless communications industry and wants to know about the structure of that industry, the main players, their competitive strategies, their technologies, etc. In addition, he knows that having done a report on that industry will look good in his portfolio. It will also give him information that he can discuss when interviewing with Qualcomm and other wireless communications companies next year at the latest. In other words, because the students are designing their own projects, they are guaranteed of the immediate feedback that the learning will have direct value to their own lives.

Second, there is a very strong structure to the course which acts as a framework for success. Students know that if they put in the effort to learn something and structure a professional report on their learning, there is no doubt as to the payoff. With "examination-style" courses, there is a certain risk. It is possible for a student to spend hours and hours studying for an exam and still not get the grade they wanted. With the Consultant Learning approach, the students are guaranteed of a payoff if they invest effort into the course. Since students are continually faced with tradeoffs on how many hours to allocate to each course, they allocate enough to courses taught using the Consultant Learning approach to attain their goals, because there is a guaranteed payoff in the form of additional "points" (dollars) toward a grade. There is no risk that their time will have been "wasted."

However, if you are at a school where grade distributions are monitored regularly and professors are criticized for "grade inflation," Consultant Learning may not be for you, particularly if you are untenured. Since many professors do not understand the differences between this grading approach and theirs, they insist on comparing apples to oranges and claiming that you are "giving too many 'A's." On the other hand, if your school follows the AACSB guidelines and its exhortation to experiment with new educational approaches, this approach can be used as an example to the AACSB that the faculty are, in fact, experimenting with non-traditional approaches to teaching and assessing students.

Benefits of Rewriting

In the "Consultant Learning" approach, students must rewrite their projects until they meet your "professionalism" criterion. Some students have to rework and resubmit projects several times before they attain "professional quality" output. It is in the rewriting that students really learn how to write. Therefore, this type of course structure teaches students how to establish a measurable question, how to find sources of information to shed light on the subject, and how to write professional quality business reports much better than courses in which a student turns in a mediocre paper and gets it back with a "C" on it. With Consultant Learning, the student is required to evaluate the instructor's comments and use that feedback to rewrite the project until it is professional.

Our school designates undergraduate courses which require lots of writing as "W" courses and students are required to take at least one "W" class during their undergraduate curriculum. Graduate courses are expected to include a significant amount of writing. Helping students

develop better writing skills is one of the goals of our school. As such, this course approach addresses an important goal of our University.

Some students come to my courses excellent writers; some come to my courses very poor writers. This course approach affords even the poor writers the opportunity to develop their writing skills by rewriting until they have produced an "A" quality piece of work. Students learn the importance of rewriting to make their written report writing better quality. In addition, students are encouraged to use whatever resources will help them to produce professional quality work, including our writing center, tutors, fellow student coaches, etc. But working with those resources and editors helps the students to develop their writing skills.

Course Design Flexibility

The "Consultant Learning" approach is extremely flexible. The instructor can designate certain projects or assignments as mandatory. Rather than requiring an assignment, however, my experience indicates that a better way is to "price" the assignment so as to make it so attractive that few students will choose to pass it up. This places the maximum control in the student's hands, and empowered individuals tend to throw themselves into things that they have chosen to do more than people who are being dictated to. Each semester I look over the list of suggested assignments in the syllabus and adjust the recommended consulting fees on those assignments I want to encourage.

If the instructor has very specific learning objectives for a course, another way to structure the learning experience is to simply allow choices, like a Chinese restaurant menu (one from column A, two from column B). As my colleague in Accounting has done, you can structure a

hierarchical list of projects and the student may not do item B until item A is completed. The instructor can also select specific learning objectives or specific types of assignments, but allow the students to select the type of organization or environment in which their study will be framed. The "Consultant Learning" approach allows the students to have power over how they learn even if the instructor maintains control over what content they will learn.

Grading Workload

A possible negative to the Consultant Learning approach is the instructor workload. With students doing several to many projects each, and many of those projects being submitted in written form, it is easy for the instructor to become overwhelmed with "grading" (paper evaluation) particularly in schools where class sizes are large. It is important for the instructor to remember that it is not his/her obligation to edit every page of a poorly written paper. I simply circle enough errors to show the student the need for proper editing (I edit at the most one or two pages), and then insist that the student get help editing the rest of their paper from the Writing Center on our campus, from fellow students, or from a tutor if needed.

It is also important to remember that with most "grading," the instructor feels obligated to "justify" the grade on the paper. With Consultant Learning, you don't have to justify yourself because you are not giving the project a "grade" that will affect the student's semester grade. You are only explaining why the paper needs to be redone and resubmitted, and what it needs to be considered professional quality. You are the coach, helping the student to develop a portfolio that will be valuable in finding a job. When a project is accepted, you need not write anything on the paper except "Paid $2,000." The word "Paid" has the same thrilling impact on the students as

the words “Accepted for Publication” have for academics, although I usually put some positive feedback on the cover page along with “Paid.”

The Consultant Learning approach is continually evolving as I learn more about how to use the approach to encourage students to perform as I want them to. For example, early in the development of this approach, one major problem I had was that a significant portion of the grading came in all in the last weeks of the course – there was no motivation for the students to turn work in earlier in the semester. I started by putting limits on how much a student could submit in any given week. However, I found that using the “price” mechanism worked even better.

I now give an “Early Submission Bonus” for turning work in earlier than the last day for submitting projects. The bonus begins at 50% for projects submitted in the second week of class and decreases by 5% per week until it reaches 0% on the last day to submit projects. This means that students who turn work in earlier can attain the same grade with less work than students who turn work in later. This motivates enough students to turn in work earlier in the semester that it spreads the grading workload out relatively evenly through the semester.

Although the Early Submission Bonus is quite effective at motivating most of the students to complete their projects as early in the semester as they can, there are always a few students who procrastinate and put all their projects off until the end of the semester. For those students I set a limit of three projects that can be submitted on any one class day by any one student during the last four weeks of the semester to force them to at least turn in some projects before the last day.

As students become more familiar with what you require, the quality of their work improves. By the end of the semester, the majority of papers submitted are professional quality and need no "grading," in the traditional sense of the word. In other words, as the instructor adjusts to this new scheme of grading, it becomes easier and faster, and as students become acquainted with what it takes to produce "professional quality" projects, learning takes place and later projects require less editing. I currently spend no more time "grading" than I used to spend making up and grading traditional essay or short answer exams in courses taught in the traditional way. However, if you are currently grading by the use of computer generated and Scantron graded multiple choice exams, or if you are teaching large sections, the Consultant Learning approach will entail a significant increase in grading and evaluation time.

For More Information

If you wish more information about how a Consultant Learning course is structured, you can visit my web page at <www.acusd.edu/~kunkel>. Click on the button "Syllabi" and you can select to see in PDF format copies of several syllabi using the Consultant Learning Approach as well as a Style Guide that my students use to help them produce professional quality business reports.

Summary

This paper describes "Consultant Learning," a new method of structuring courses in management, small business, and entrepreneurship in a way that empowers students and places them in control of their own learning process. The "Consultant Learning" approach turns the

classroom into a laboratory for the free enterprise system, using price as the allocation mechanism for grades earned.

The "Consultant Learning" approach uses a significantly different paradigm from traditional courses, holding the quality of work students do constant at a very high level and grading on the basis of the quantity of work performed by each student. Quantity of work performed becomes the grading dimension while students are taught that mediocre quality is NEVER acceptable.

Consultant Learning offers a viable and valuable alternative to traditional pedagogy while offering a flexible and interesting new paradigm for management and business education.

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