



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Showing What They Know

Ever had the nagging suspicion that two weeks after the exam your students do not know what they have learned? I had always used a traditional lecture/discussion format in my marketing principles course and evaluated with objective/essay exams. My justification was that marketing principles, like many other courses, has terminology and methodology that must be mastered. But I think I always knew there was some problem with my "if I have taught it, they have learned it" mentality.

At a recent conference on competency-based assessment, no one else seemed to like the lecture/exam format either. Local employers who served as program advisors continually complained of recent graduates who could not write a report, make a presentation, or work cooperatively. Students complained they were reduced to memorizing definitions rather than learning skills for the "real world." I needed to find a way to assess that would allow students to experience problem solving in a group, give them practice reporting their ideas to others, and provide them with an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of marketing principles to potential employers.



I decided to reform my syllabus to eliminate traditional testing and replace it with a series of group and individual reports. Students would compile final reports into a portfolio; in the meantime they would practice working in groups, learn to write reports, and have a tangible product to show potential employers. Since I had used portfolio assessment successfully for several years in business writing, I was confident I could make this method work for marketing principles.

The Projects

To introduce basic concepts and develop group cohesion, groups worked on in-class case analyses during the first weeks. Students developed solutions to the marketing problems presented in the short, end-of-chapter vignettes. After a lecture on how reports are compiled and used in the marketing world, students made brief, oral reports on case findings.

In order to get to know the students better, I assigned an autobiographical memo, focusing on goals and achievements, as the first portfolio project. We talked about reader focus, document purpose, appropriate style, and memo form. After I reviewed the drafts, students rewrote the memos until they were satisfied with the final product. When the piece was ready, it went into the portfolio.

Next, the groups began a collaborative library research project. This project required groups to research potential target markets for a fund-raising organization, to select the most advantageous one, and to substantiate their decision in a three-page position paper. The reference librarian conducted mandatory workshops on secondary research methodology for marketers. For the month-long project, groups met one class period per week.

In class, students organized and delegated the tasks of the project within their groups; outside of class, students researched and wrote their papers. I helped interpret research materials, directed further research, and lectured on the mechanics of persuasive writing. I functioned as editor by reading student drafts and making comments on additional information that was needed, organization of information, effective substantiation of arguments, and overall form. When groups were satisfied with the final product, they filed a copy of their paper into their own portfolio.

The third project was site location study for a retailer, and it was also a group undertaking. This was the most comprehensive project of the term and required four components: an executive summary, a competitive analysis, a traffic pattern analysis, and a sales forecast based on population composition and density. Students used out-of-class time for field work; I used in-class time for activity coordination, explanation of methods of data collection, and draft reviews. Students submitted interim progress reports. Conducting conferences with individuals and groups was an integral part of this project, and class time was used for this purpose. Research groups presented oral reports on their recommended locations; the other groups evaluated their findings and methods through discussion after the presentations. The students and I worked



together to fine tune the reports before placing them in the portfolios. The goal was to produce reports that were professional in both content and form.

Finally, I requested several individual projects be completed and included in the portfolio: a memo to the vice president of marketing critiquing a competitor's marketing strategy, a memo to a potential client developing a pricing strategy for a service organization, a sales letter to a defined target market promoting a magazine subscription, and a letter to a customer recommending a media schedule.

As we covered the corresponding text chapters, I used these projects as demonstration devices. For example, we discussed pricing methods in class before they worked at home developing a strategy to put in the memo. I provided samples of the memos and letters they were to be writing. Again, students submitted drafts for me to edit. I pointed out how to increase readability, use marketing terminology effectively, and write concisely. When each student believed that a final form was achieved, the work went into the portfolio.

Students submitted portfolios for grading during the last week of the term. I requested drafts be included to assist in evaluation. I envisioned the student's portfolio to be the showpiece of the course.

Reactions

I found it difficult to "let go" of exams, but I was very impressed with the significant body of quality work students had produced in their portfolios. I was able to look at their work as a whole and see how effectively they had integrated course content, writing skills, decision-making skills, and group skills.

These projects truly demonstrated what the student had learned about the subject. As I was able to evaluate growth in knowledge over time, the grading process was fairer because it was a more accurate measure of actual performance in the course.

In spite of the extra work of editing and holding conferences, the portfolios had many advantages from a teacher's perspective. By giving students more control (via groups and opportunities to rewrite), they were more committed to the projects, assessed their own work, and performed more effectively. All students became active learners. I had more chances to provide meaningful feedback. Students read and acted on the feedback because they wanted to improve their work and earn a higher grade. My classroom was an enjoyable place to be, as there was the sense of community within the groups that develops when individuals work toward a common goal. I became a partner in my students' learning.

This is not to say that problems did not exist; these were challenging tasks for community college students. Many underprepared students were unable to meet project criteria. Some were unwilling or unable to commit the amount of time the work required. As the portfolios were not due until the end of the term, many students procrastinated and experienced a time crunch at the end of the term. Sometimes they revealed inadequate preparation by a lack of cooperation in group work; often, they directed their frustration at me.

Although there were some student complaints, ranging from "the whole thing was too much work" to personality conflicts within groups, students seemed satisfied overall with the outcomes of the course. Most were justifiably proud of their accomplishments, as demonstrated by their portfolios. One student used her portfolio during a transfer interview and received credit for the course in transfer. A number of students submitted portfolios at job and internship interviews.

But the most common reaction was the sense of control and ownership the students found in the course through this grading mechanism. They determined when the product was ready for "the marketplace," and they experienced the amount of work that is often necessary to achieve a project goal.



As a result of this experience, I have refined the process. Now, I provide sample portfolios and specific evaluation criteria in written form, invite former students to discuss the course with current students, and review portfolios in individual conferences at mid-term. Group leaders must now provide weekly progress reports.

This method of evaluation is the best way I have found to achieve my original goals for students: have an active group experience, improve business writing skills, and demonstrate knowledge of marketing principles.

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