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Skill Development for Business Students



William L. Enslin

Abstract

Developing students' skills is stressed as a part of teaching excellence. However, in most business courses, students do not receive direct feedback or a grade on skill performance. A Management Practicum course has been developed to provide a more integrated approach to skill development. This paper discusses the shortcomings of the old approach, its conceptual foundations, and the benefits of the Management Practicum.

The draft mission statement for the Rowan College School of Business Administration (SOBA) talks about "striving for excellence in teaching, which includes current knowledge and skill development." On close examination, SOBA's performance on skill development is mixed. Skill may be defined as "practical ability and dexterity; knowledge; expertness; aptitude." SOBA has identified the following skill areas that should be an integral part of the business core curriculum: oral and written communications, teamwork, quantitative skills, information technology, and critical thinking. In light of the critique of present efforts, five members of the Management Department have designed a Management Practicum course to provide a more integrated approach to skill development.

Present skill development activities include courses on skill

development, courses in which a particular skill is a priority, and courses in which skill development activities, although unstated as such, are an integral part of knowledge acquisition. At Rowan, courses in skill development include College Composition I and II, Public Speaking, and Computer Literacy. There are Writing Intensive courses, including Organizational Behavior, in the Business core, and M.I.S., in which information technology is the skill being emphasized. In the Business Policy course, communications, teamwork, and critical thinking are objectives. However, in both M.I.S. and Business Policy, the individual student does not receive a separate grade on skill performance, nor any direct feedback.

In evaluating our success in meeting our mission of skill development, anecdotal evidence from faculty teaching these courses supports the view that some progress is being achieved. However, there are a number of shortcomings in the present approach:

1. There are no courses that teach either critical thinking or teamwork—or have these skills as a priority.
2. Progressively higher standards of skill performance have not been developed and communicated to the students or the faculty. There has been no check for consistency of standards among the faculty. At graduation, students are not apprised as to whether they have attained an acceptable level of skill development.
3. There are no skill development plans for students or courses identified for the progressive development of skills over the span of the business curriculum.
4. As business faculty, we teach our students the principles of organizational learning, yet we fail to model these principles in the School of Business Administration. A learning organization is an “organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights” (Garvin, 1993, p. 80). In essence, we have no systematic way of evaluating our success in skill development activities to make continuous improvement.

In 1993, the U.S. industry average of training expenditures equaled 1.2 percent of payroll dollars. Very successful U.S. companies, such as General Electric (4.6 percent), U.S. Robotics (4.2 percent), Motorola (4.0 percent), and Texas Instruments (3.0 percent) spend more than double the U.S. average (Enslin, 1994, p. 1). For the past decade, spending on corporate education has grown by 5 percent a year. Companies spend \$50 billion a year on education, including skill development, and account for about half of America's total spending on education (*The Economist*, 1995, p. 79).

I examined over 100 management training programs to ascertain the importance of skill development. Close to 60% were primarily skill development, and another 15% had skill development activities, although unstated as such, listed in the content. Business executives participating in the School of Business activities seem to view skill development very seriously. They have indicated that they expect our students to be skill proficient at graduation. Also, students are expected to continuously improve their skill performance on the job in a constantly changing business environment.

Almost 75% of U.S. organizations participating in a survey report that the link between skill training and successful performance management is "very strong" (Kirksey & Zawacki, 1994, p. 26).

In the SOBA Management Practicum course, an assessment center approach was used as one of the conceptual foundations. Such an approach provides an objective, off-the-job evaluation of developed skills, potentials, strengths, and weaknesses (Bray, 1976). The skills evaluated in an assessment center, along with leadership, include those identified as priorities by the School of Business. In an assessment center approach, an individual is placed in a decision-making, role-playing experience that simulates a desired job situation. Trained evaluators rate the observed behavior of the individual in the simulation. At the conclusion of the simulation, the evaluators provide specific performance feedback to the individual. The assessment center approach was developed

because of dissatisfaction with the success of promotion decisions and the inability of training departments to trace the effects of training on productivity.

In the proposed Management Practicum course, students participate in exercises that simulate responsibilities they will face in their first jobs after graduation. Evaluators would be responsible faculty members and their peers participating in the assessment simulation. Observers would be trained to focus on specific behaviors in each exercise and limit their observations to previously selected traits and abilities. Implicit in any evaluation are the criteria against which performance is compared. For each of the skills, acceptable performance would be defined by describing desired observable behaviors. For communication skills, criteria normally used for judging oral and written communications would be tailored to the dynamics of a simulated work situation. Using appropriate feedback techniques, students would receive an assessment of their performance at the end of each assessment center experience.

Old Dominion University has established an assessment center and built an experimental course around it. With some experimentation, they were able to adapt the assessment center concept to an academic environment. These were the specific goals of the course:

1. To inform students about the strengths and weaknesses of their critical leadership/managerial skills.
2. To improve students' observation and evaluation skills and their ability to provide information and evaluations to others.
3. To improve students' ability to evaluate themselves and accept constructive criticism and praise from others.
4. To familiarize students with the assessment center concept and its use.

The anecdotal evaluation of this experimental course was extremely positive. Student energy and involvement were

very high because learning involved each student personally. Also, each student could put into practice his or her accumulated cognitive learning in a simulated business or management world (McAfee & Hawryluk, 1984, p. 260).

Other successes with the assessment center concept were reported by both Hamilton Standard Commercial Aircraft Electronics Division of United Technologies and AT&T, which founded the concept. Hamilton Standard was able to recruit and retain a talented, cross-functional work force, whose certified skills cover more than fifty-two areas. Further, the teams have been effective at improving customer-acceptance rates while lowering cost (Kirksey & Zawacki, 1994). Of the college graduate management trainees at AT&T rated likely to reach middle management within ten years, some 64% had, in fact, reached middle management within eight years. Also at AT&T, 100% of sales representatives who were rated as "more than acceptable" met all the performance standards (Howard, 1983, p. 31). The widespread adaptation of the assessment center concept by American businesses is further proof of the value of the concept.

Another conceptual foundation of the Management Practicum course is portfolio assessment. Portfolios are commonly used in fine and performing arts and writing courses. The purpose of portfolios is to collect and display works that illustrate the progress of skill over time. The Management Practicum course is structured to be three one-credit modules, to be taken at the beginning, middle, and end of the upper-class portion of the business curriculum. In the context of John Dewey's definition of education as the "cumulative movement of action toward a later result," portfolios document students' progress in skill development (Dewey, 1938, p. 87). Documentation and feedback from each skill activity, either from the Management Practicum or from other business courses, would become part of the students' portfolios. The materials that might be included would be written reports, videos of presentations, evaluation sheets of team performance, case study

evaluations, computer output reports, and graded quantitative problems. The range of examples would provide a good indication of students' strengths and weaknesses in each of the skill areas. At graduation, the portfolio might well provide a creditable measure of skill performance to a prospective employer.

To measure satisfactory performance, each of the skill areas would have an objective criterion, which would be increased over the two-year period of the Management Practicum. A difficulty might occur in trying to maintain consistency in rating skill performance, particularly if ratings are increased. While all faculty will be trained in rating skill performance, the faculty member in charge of the Management Practicum will be responsible for monitoring faculty ratings. If ratings vary, the Management Practicum instructor will work with the faculty involved to correct the problem. While it may be assumed that portfolios provide a more accurate assessment of skill proficiency, this was not the primary reason for employing them in writing programs. The value of portfolios as a communication device and the training and development of faculty in grading skill performance were found to be even more valuable (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 1993). Portfolios have proven to be a more accurate indication of skill progress than pencil and paper tests (*Time*, 1991). Also, portfolios encourage self-assessment because students internalize the standards and judge for themselves the quality of their work.

Besides being a resource to other faculty members in rating skill performance, the instructor in the Management Practicum can also suggest a range of skill development activities. Based upon the skill demonstrated in portfolios, the instructor can apprise all the faculty in the School of Business of the overall skill performance levels of our students. In the context of continuous improvement, the faculty can then experiment with other approaches to increase the level of skill performance.

The third conceptual foundation of the Management Practicum would be goal setting. Management by Objectives has

been a standard management tool for many years in American businesses. MBO provides performance focus and helps to set priorities. The objective-setting process, if done properly, can build commitment to the desired results and motivate the individual to achieve the objectives (Mager, 1972). In the Management Practicum course, the student would set personal goals, with the guidance of the instructor, for each of the skill areas. If overly optimistic objectives are set, failure by the student to achieve those objectives would discourage performance progress. Documented performance in the portfolio would enable students and faculty members to measure progress against the objectives. If there are problems, the instructor can work with students to get back on target. With defined performance objectives, students can monitor their own progress.

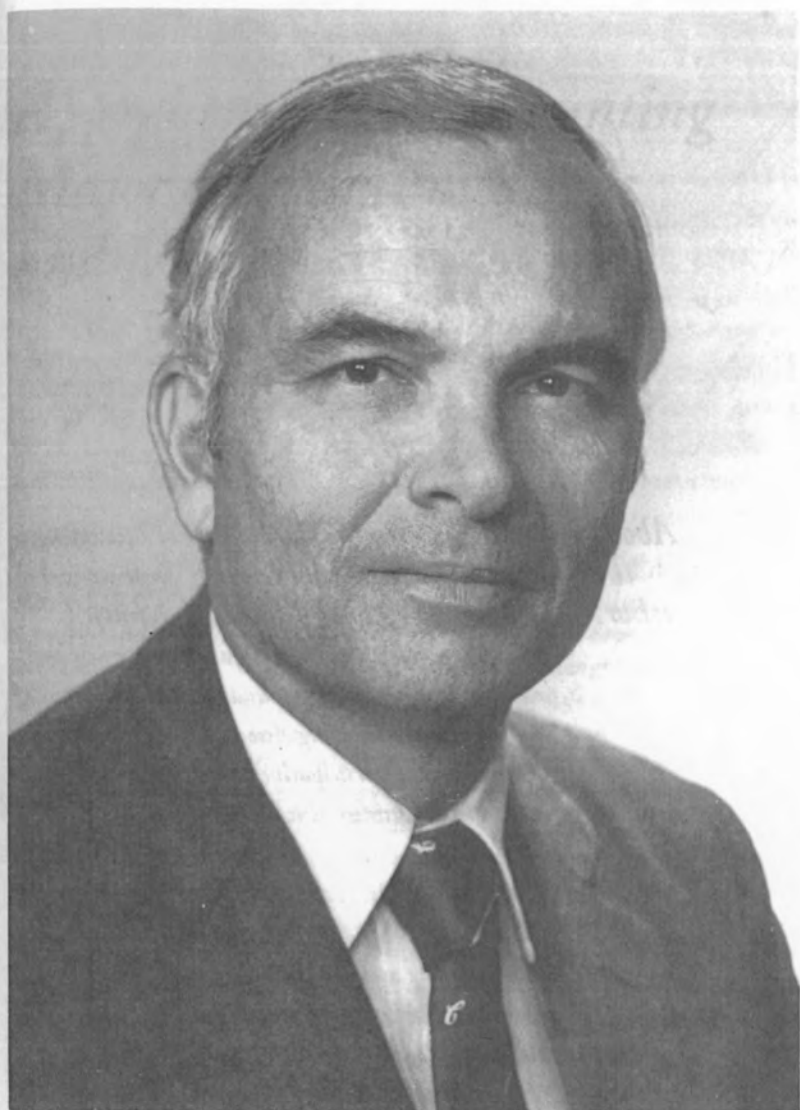
Students would prepare a development plan in each of the three modules of the Management Practicum. The development plan would spell out the courses and skill activities that students plan to undertake prior to the next module. Each skill would have a performance objective to be attained. In the next module, students and the faculty member would evaluate how well students have met the objectives. In the final module before graduation, students would prepare a development plan of post-graduate skill activities that would promote continued progress in skill development.

In summary, the Management Practicum is designed to deal with shortcomings identified in the present approaches to skill development. Students and faculty will become more cognizant of the implications of learning activities in skill development. With a more systematic approach to skill development, the School of Business Administration will attain its mission of achieving excellence in teaching.

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R. Gordon McGovern, Campbell's CEO, spoke at the Management Institute's first Scholarship Dinner, 1987.