



College Quarterly

Fall 2005 - Volume 8 Number 4

▲ Home

◀ Contents

The Career Fair Project: A Ten Year Experiment in Performance-Based Learning

by Vicki Stewart

Abstract

This article summarizes my experiences in developing an educational initiative known as the Career Fair Project within the curriculum of the Legal Administration/Law Clerk program at Durham College over the past ten years. A performance-based, student-centered project, the Career Fair empowers students to work collaboratively with one another in order to gain employment within their chosen field. In this article, I discuss the rationale and structure of the course, as well as the outcomes of the project, and methods of evaluation. I also discuss numerous problems that I have encountered along the way, and theorize potential solutions in hopes that this information might be helpful to other educators who wish to develop similar performance-based projects within a college environment.

Introduction

This paper examines performance-based learning and assessment strategies that I have developed and implemented within the Legal Administration/Law Clerk program at Durham College in Oshawa, Ontario over the past ten years. I will focus, in particular, on my experiences in facilitating a course known as “Organizational Communications 5200,” better known as the Career Fair Project.

Several aspects of the course, including its educational outcomes and method of evaluation, do not follow traditional methods of teaching, learning, and assessment. However, it is my strong conviction that this unique educational opportunity has been a positive learning experience for students in Durham’s Legal Administration/Law Clerk program. The purpose of this article is to summarize my experiences in working on this course in hopes that my observations might be of use to other educators interested in developing similar problem-based pedagogical initiatives within a College environment.

Background and Course Rationale

About a decade ago, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training mandated every community college program to incorporate prescribed generic and vocational skills outcomes into their curricula. About this same time I was facing a dilemma of how to make a communications course in the graduating semester of a 3-year program that I was teaching more relevant to my students. I was

interested in moving to a more student-directed learning model. Durham's Legal Administration/Law Clerk program was undergoing a program review at the time. I suggested that we revamp the 3rd year Communications Course into an experiential course that would empower students to create their own learning objectives and work towards a real-world goal—namely, a job placement within their chosen field of study. Thus, students in the course were given a problem that they would need to collaboratively solve: they were asked to develop a program-specific Career Fair and employer luncheon at which they could network and market themselves to potential employers within the field of Legal Administration. This satisfied the Ministry of Education's "Vocational Learning Outcome": "use effective human relations, interpersonal and team skills in an organizational environment." It also satisfied the "Generic Skills Learning Outcome" which suggested that students ought to "represent her or his skills, knowledge and experience realistically for personal and employment purposes."

Course Structure

The semester begins with a brief overview of the course. Course participants then watch student-produced videos and local news clips and read the final reports of previous years' events.

Before dividing into teams, students undergo Myers-Briggs testing in order to learn about their individual preferences in life and work. In the second class of the semester, students organize themselves into approximately 20 teams of 3 persons each. Each group develops a memorandum of intention that states their objectives and timelines to help them gain control of subsequent activities. Team members enter into a contract with the other members of their work group. The team contract includes a mission statement, goals, expectations, policies, and procedures, as well as preliminary project plans. Each person completes a team skill worksheet that identifies skills that each member can contribute to the team and the skills that each feels need further development. This allows more creativity in identifying resources, learner needs and in developing strategies for self-improvement.

Each team is responsible for planning a different aspect of the Career Fair including the invitation, the guest speaker, the luncheon, the Career Fair room, the emcee, gifts/honourarium, media, set up/cleanup, registration, seating arrangements, budget and fundraising, resumes, photography, agenda, research, communications, and feedback. Project teams generate specific tasks and work on them in order to achieve their objectives. One classroom hour per week is devoted to the presentation of verbal progress reports by each group. Groups also post discussions, surveys and queries on WebCT. The students manage their own progress and I act as a guide or mentor.

The instructor takes on the role of facilitator in this course,

encouraging discovery in an environment where ideas can be linked together and enhanced through team effort. I try to ensure that every student is involved in the process, regardless of his or her level of ability or dedication. Discussions about human perception, human relationships in organizations, effective communication skills, group dynamics, leadership, and motivation are led by the facilitator. In resume workshops, students learn how to refine their resumes in order to appeal to today's employers. The students also learn interview and job searching techniques and develop a professional portfolio for themselves in order to assist in self-promotion.

Readings are assigned on the stages of team development and group dynamics. Special emphasis is placed on the skills and attitudes that employers value most: flexibility, tolerance, supportiveness, acceptance, taking initiative, interpersonal, and communication skills. Business letters and memoranda going to potential employers are all proofread by the Communications Group. Interview, cold-calling and department skills are refined and honed in class. Students conduct background research on potential employers who are then invited to the Career Fair by the students. If a group does not—or cannot—secure an employer, the facilitator will assist but the onus is on the students to practice what they will have to do upon graduation—contact employers to find out if they are hiring. Each year approximately 20 -25 employers attend the Career Fair. I have heard many times from employers that they are hugely impressed by the students' professionalism, interview skills, presentation skills, and self-confidence.

The timeframe involved (one college semester-15 weeks) is relatively short for 50 to 60 individuals to organize an event of this magnitude. Within this timeframe, each group must outline well-defined, self-directed objectives, adapt to changing requirements, and demonstrate strong communications skills as they work together towards a common goal. Students must work collaboratively with one another, developing and polishing their interpersonal and organizational skills. Students plan the Career Fair in teams that reflect the organizational structure of a business. Through this enterprise, students are confronted with a range of seemingly extra-curricular issues that are actually of vital importance in today's workplace—issues such as hierarchy, cultural diversity, and differing levels of skill and motivation. Students experience first hand how different groups within a multi-faceted organization must work together in order to achieve a common goal.

Career Day

The Career Day itself is structured around a luncheon hosted by an emcee from the student body and a guest speaker (generally an alumnus of program). Some years, students are only able to raise a small portion of the costs of staging this event while in other years, the students have raised all of the money themselves through community donations and other fundraising strategies including bake sales, on-

campus pubs, selling of chocolates, etc. If the students do not raise enough money, the event is sponsored through the College's School of Justice on a reduced scale. For example, we might offer sandwiches instead of dinner service at the Career Fair luncheon. Sometimes, tensions flare between different student teams regarding the fundraising process as well as the ways in which the funds ought to be allocated. Students are faced with competing priorities for restricted resources as they would in life and work.

The students choose a lead ambassador from each group. Each lead ambassador introduces the employer representative sitting at their table so that all students will have a chance to learn about the job prospects at that particular firm. Each group researches and profiles their employer, and the information is compiled into a booklet for each student to assist in their job search. After the formalities and lunch, Career Fair participants adjourn to the previously set-up breakout room for the networking portion of the Career Fair. Here students can approach all the employers to obtain information about career opportunities, and learn about the skills that employers in the field value most. Students often even participate in impromptu interviews.

Outcomes

The Organizational Communications course requires students to investigate the real life challenge of learning how to promote themselves in today's marketplace and learn about careers in their field. The most concrete outcome is that the Career Fair introduces students to prospective employers and allows students the opportunity to network and socialize in a relaxed environment with legal professionals. Many students land jobs in their chosen profession as a result of connections made at the Career Fair. Virtually every student in the class is contacted for an interview each year. Students often receive multiple job offers. The Legal Administration/Law Clerk program continues to enjoy a very high job-placement rate after graduation (generally upwards of 90 %), which I believe is attributable in no small part to the Career Fair.

Some employers who attend the Career Fair do not have immediate staffing needs. However, they tend to retain their copy of the book of student resumes as well as their memories of a well-organized student initiative. As a result, students continue to receive calls for interviews long after the Career Fair day itself.

The Organizational Communications course has other benefits as well. In our class on interview techniques, the students are asked to create examples of behavioural-type questions that an employer might ask. The current trend in employment interviews is to ask an applicant to describe a situation from their background where a particular behaviour was exhibited. The thinking is that past behaviours are a good indicator of how a person will react to similar situations in the future. Questions about working in a team

environment, being flexible, leading and supporting, accomplishing group goals, and resolving conflict are all questions that have been asked of our students by Human Resources professionals in the large law firms. Students and employers often tell me that they draw extensively on their experiences in organizing the Career Fair when answering these questions. Employers report they can assess the personal and performance attributes needed to succeed within the culture of their firm as a result of students' responses about the Career Fair.

There are broader educational outcomes associated with this enterprise as well. The Career Fair fosters a sense of self-confidence amongst students, many of whom report a sense of responsibility and accomplishment as a result of this process. Learning to be flexible is another key benefit of this growth experience. One student commented to me that allowing others the latitude to do their jobs was a valuable learning experience for her. She had always maintained tight control of previous group projects in school and ended up doing most of the work every time. The Career Fair organization was too large a project for her to do this. By relinquishing control, she and her classmates were able to achieve more positive results and the student in question learned to trust others in a collaborative setting.

Method(s) of Evaluation

Evaluation within the Organizational Communications course is based largely on a model performance-assessment, as described by Michele Schmidt and Leo Plue: "Alternative assessments are often designed to motivate students to take more responsibility for their own learning, to make assessment an integral part of the learning experience itself and to embed the process in authentic learning activities based on higher order thinking skills (e.g., investigation, problem-solving, persuasive writing etc.). The underlying principle of performance based assessment, in particular, involves assessing students within the context of classroom tasks" (2000 p. 14). However, McDonald et al., note that "Concrete, real world problems ... are messy, involve uncertainty, complexity and present measurement difficulties. As a result, 'real-world' problems do not harmonize well with mandated curricula, textbooks, standardized tests...and the 40 [or 50] minute period." (1992 p.21).

Given the difficulties associated with performance-assessment I have implemented a range of evaluative strategies within the Organizational Communications course. Professional conduct, co-operation, teamwork, attendance, punctuality, creativity, conflict resolution, contribution to goals and objectives, listening skills, negotiating skills, team leadership skills, as well as the ability to adapt to differences in team members' work styles are all measured through a variety of assessments including self, peer, and instructor modes of evaluation.

Students are encouraged to be self-reflective and to identify

organizational and interpersonal skills they wish to improve upon. In general, students rate their own learning quite high when they conduct an assessment of their own experience in the course. Participants also provide and receive feedback from their peers in order to help them identify strengths and weaknesses in teamwork situations.

Students are assessed, both individually and on a group basis by the instructor using a variety of assessment tools. All students do not necessarily receive the same group mark as the students decide together if team members' contributions have been in equal proportions. Various reports and assignments are handed in for grading by the instructor. A task-specific rubric is utilized for assessment of employability skills exhibited by the students.

Employers also play a role in the evaluation process as they are asked to respond to questions on student-generated feedback forms. The assignment of a final formal report provides a blueprint of plans, problems, contacts, resources, recommendations for improvement and a general framework for future classes to follow.

Problems and Recommendations

Historically, the Career Fair has received positive feedback from students and employers alike. However, as with any collaborative enterprise, the Career Fair has also experienced several problems over the years. I would like to examine some of these problems—and potential solutions—in the present context in hopes that this information will be of use to other educators contemplating a similar pedagogical initiative.

Problem 1: Communication Breakdowns

Because all of the teams are dependant on each other to research and provide information in a timely and efficient manner, communication breakdowns happen from time to time. Students are encouraged to use multiple communication channels to convey messages to one another; however, messages are sometimes interpreted in a manner quite different from the way in which they are intended.

Recommendation:

Include evaluative criteria in the rubric assessment pertaining to how well teams communicate with the rest of the work group and the organization as a whole.

Problem 2: Stress

The stresses associated with finding funding, meeting deadlines, and securing employers willing to participate in the Career Fair, all contribute to a highly energized atmosphere. The stress level is high every year when we undertake this venture for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the Career Fair takes place in the graduating semester and they are all vying for the same jobs upon

graduation.

Recommendation:

Competition is very much a reality in the world of business as it is in all varieties of post-secondary education. So I do not see the competitive aspects of the Career Fair as an entirely negative thing. Being exposed to competition early in students' careers will hopefully give them an advantage when they enter the field of legal administration. That said, it would be worthwhile to invite as many employers as possible to the Career Fair so that there are job opportunities for more students.

Problem 3: Conflict

Students have a tendency to organize themselves into groups that reinforce social groupings within the class. This can result in added tensions between different teams. Some years, students are unable to put aside their differences in order to progress beyond the conflict stage of group development and into performance mode.

Recommendation:

In order to help forestall such tensions, I would suggest that teams ought to be determined at random in collaborative student projects of this sort (instead of letting friends work together).

Conflict is very much a part of most of the organizations that I have had occasion to observe throughout my career including large and small companies, profit and non-profit organizations, public and private enterprise. Depending on the particular problems students are dealing with, more emphasis could be put on the causes of stress and conflict and possible resolutions. Students are encouraged to self-regulate, as they will have to do in the real work world with as little facilitator intervention as possible. Stress management and conflict resolution are accomplished through the teacher's mediation and intervention only when absolutely necessary. In rare cases, severe conflicts may need to be referred to a third party mediator outside of the classroom.

Problem 4: WebCT Etiquette

In recent years, I have introduced a WebCT component into the Organizational Communications course. My intention was to provide an online forum in which students could communicate with one another and further develop creative ideas. Students could log on to WebCT both inside and outside of class time in order to participate in discussions. This communication tool was used extensively by the students with effective results. Occasionally, the tone of some WebCT discussion postings has been inappropriate within a business or educational setting.

Recommendation:

It is important that clear protocols regarding WebCT etiquette be outlined at the outset of the course. Students should also be evaluated on their use of WebCT with marks allotted for

professionalism.

Conclusion

Each year the Conference Board of Canada surveys a variety of employers asking them what skills and attributes are needed to contribute effectively to work life. The Conference Board of Canada identified necessary employability skills for the new millennium in the year 2000. The following “soft skills” are described as “the skills you need to enter, stay in, and progress in the world of work.”

Work With Others

- Understand and work within the dynamics of a group
- Ensure that a team’s purpose and objectives are clear
- Be flexible: respect, be open to and supportive of the thoughts, opinions and contributions of others in a group
- Recognize and respect people’s diversity, individual differences and perspectives
- Accept and provide feedback in a constructive and considerate manner
- Contribute to a team by sharing information and expertise
- Lead or support when appropriate, motivating a group for high performance
- Understand the role of conflict in a group to reach solutions
- Manage and resolve conflict when appropriate

Participate in Projects and Tasks

- Plan, design or carry out a project or task from start to finish with well-defined objectives and outcomes
- Develop a plan, seek feedback, test, revise and implement
- Work to agreed quality standards and specification
- Select and use appropriate tools and technology for a task or project
- Adapt to changing requirements and information
- Continuously monitor the success of a project or task and identify ways to improve. (Conference Board of Canada 2000)

These skills are precisely the skills that are fostered through the Career Fair project.

Generally, the difficulties encountered each year are organizational communication problems. The course allows the students to learn from their mistakes in a relatively safe environment before they are out in the working world. Feedback indicates that the students recognize that they benefit in a myriad of ways from their experiences in the Organizational Communications course, not the least of which is that many students end up with contacts for potential job placements. Exposing students to a setting in which they must work collaboratively with others is one way in which I have tried to prepare graduates for their future careers.

Based on the success of the Organizational Communications experiment, I have worked with other educators to integrate a career fair component into their programs. At the 1997 Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) conference in Halifax, I presented a template for other educators across Canada to embark on a collaborative student-directed enterprise. Within Durham College, the idea was adopted by Career and Employment Services and a very successful college-wide job fair was implemented. It too has become an annual tradition. I have consulted with other programs within the College as well, several of which have incorporated a Career Fair into their respective curricula.

Different programs have varying degrees of student involvement in the organization of their respective Career Fairs. The smoothest seem to be those that are teacher-designed. Inviting input from, and delegating the decision-making to 50-60 highly competitive students is, admittedly, a difficult task. Although it may be easier to mount a Career Fair with minimal student input, I am convinced, based on my ten years of experience in teaching this course, that students benefit to a far greater extent when they play a central role in the organization of the Career Fair.

References

McDonald, J. et al. (1992). Graduation by exhibition: Assessing genuine achievement.

Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Ministry of Education and Training, The Colleges Branch. (1998). Approved program standard for six-semester Legal Administration Programs. MCU Code 62611. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/college/progstan/humserv/legal6.html>

Schmidt, M. Plue, L. (2000). The new world of performance-based assessment. Orbit. Volume 30, Iss 4; Pg14.

The Conference Board of Canada (2000). Employability skills 2000+. Retrieved from: <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/education/learningtools/pdfs/esp2000.pdf>

Vicki Stewart is a professor in the School of Justice Studies at Durham College in Oshawa. She teaches Real Estate law, Business Law, and Organizational Communications. She has been a Legal Administrative Professional for 30 years and Title Search Consultant to several law firms and businesses in the Greater Toronto Area. She can be reached at vicki.stewart@durhamcollege.ca or 905 721-3111 X 7384.

◀ Contents

- The views expressed by the authors are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The College Quarterly or of Seneca College.

Copyright © 2005 - The College Quarterly, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology