CASE STUDIES

DEVELOPING STUDENTS’ CRITICAL WRITING AND ANALYTIC SKILLS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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WHAT’S IN THIS CASE STUDY FOR YOU?

This case study will be of interest to you if you are looking for ways to incorporate the development of critical and analytical skills into your course. It addresses the problems that many students face in being able to move from simply describing information to critically evaluating information. This is particularly problematic in classes with students from diverse backgrounds, where skills development in this area are neither fostered nor encouraged.

ISSUES IN STUDENT LEARNING

- A key skill required of students in Higher education is the ability to think critically and analytically. This involves being able to read critically, evaluating the literature in the process; and the ability to write critically, including expressing one’s opinions, making comparisons and exploring alternatives to problem solving.

- The need to develop and strengthen these skills is essential in courses such as IBUS1101 and IBUS1108 as a large part of these courses involve comparative analyses of countries, cultures and global business environments, and a large part of the teaching involves problem based learning and case studies.

- Given that approximately 50% of the students in IBUS1102 were from non-English speaking backgrounds and had English as a second language, and approximately 35% were international students who had limited experience (and little confidence) in this approach to learning, strategies had to be developed to address issues in this area.

- For all students, critical and analytical skills are essential for life long learning and need to be fostered early in the First Year.

- Initial critical writing and case analysis activities conducted in IBUS1101 in Semester 1 indicated poor performance and a need for the strengthening of attributes in this area. The intention of this case study was to scaffold the development of critical and analytic skills across the consecutive first year courses in International Business in semesters one and two. Each course had approximately 400 students.

Students are often unsure about what is involved in ‘critical thinking’ or are afraid to venture their opinions.

Questions and comments included:

“What do you mean by critical thinking?”

“How do you know when what you are saying is correct?”

“How can I criticise the work of an expert?”

“We’ve never been taught how to criticise or evaluate someone else’s work”.

“It would be good to have examples.”

(An excellent suggestion. But as the activity was new, no examples were available in this session.

Best practice examples have been collected for 2003).
SECTION 3 : WORKSHOP THEMES

DEVELOPING WRITING, INFORMATION LITERACY AND RESEARCH SKILLS IN THE FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM

STRATEGY

A BRIEF INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND

Students enrolled in IBUS11102 need to develop an understanding of how and why cultures and countries differ in business behaviours (e.g. communication, negotiation, motivation, leadership, conflict resolution etc.), and how to manage these differences. They are required to engage in comparative analyses of cultural and managerial practices, skills being gained through activities such as critical review of the literature, case analyses and a major research project. Each of these activities is outlined below.

1. Critical review of the literature

Students were required to select two journal articles relating to their research project and conduct a comparative review of the articles.

To provide a framework for the critical review, and to demonstrate the difference between simply reporting and critically reviewing, they were provided with several sources of information including:

- Lecture / lecture notes on conducting critical analyses
- Theoretical framework-Edward De Bono’s “Thinking Hats” to identify:
  (a) the nature of the information
  (b) the strengths/relevance/benefits of the information
  (c) the weaknesses of the information/what is missing or lacking
  (d) individual response to the information
  (e) alternatives and new ideas/suggestions for improvement
  (f) conclusions and future directions
- Guidelines from the Education Development Unit (EDU)
- Tutorial guidance and assistance
- Special support workshops with the EDU
- Websites for further information
- Critical Review Language (including a list of key words used in reviewing literature, written by Martin Davis, Monash University)
- The placement of all these resources on the course website for on-going reference).

QUOTES

“The extra support classes and workshops helped us to practise criticising someone else’s work. It gave us some confidence, even though it was difficult to do.”

“This assignment taught me not to take information that I read for granted—that is, I must evaluate the information and look at it critically before accepting it. It made me think more carefully about what I was reading.”
2. **Case Analysis**

The problem based and case analysis approach to learning is frequently used in International Business. Once again, critical and analytical skills are required for this approach, and practice was provided through the critical examination of a case relating to each of the weekly topics studied. To provide a framework for case analyses, the following resources were provided:

- Lecture / lecture notes on undertaking case analyses
- A 4-step model for analysing cases including:
  (a) identifying the problem
  (b) analysing the issues
  (c) evaluating alternative solutions
  (d) making recommendations

The approach was also used for assessing skills in this area in the mid-session exam.

In an extension to this approach, students were encouraged to write cases based on their own cross-cultural experiences, an activity that has generated much interest. The cases that have been contributed will be published in the form of a casebook for IBUS1101 and IBUS1102 - a positive and valuable outcome.

3. **Research Project and Comparative Report**

Critical and analytic skills were also practised and enhanced in a major project that required students to research and compare cross cultural business behaviours in two countries of their choice. The project was an extension of Task 1 - Critical Review of the Literature. It was also supported by a lecture by Julie Nolan (Librarian) on accessing country and culture specific resources - an extension of the Information Literacy Skills Project commenced in IBUS1101, once again based on the principle of scaffolding skills development across the two semesters in IBUS1101 and IBUS1102.

Special 'Report Writing Workshops' and 'Discipline Specific Consultations' were offered by the EDU to ensure best practice and maximise student performance in relation to this task.
**DISCUSSION**

A. **BENEFITS**

- The critical review of the literature set the context for the course in terms of critical writing. Students were introduced to what was expected in terms of writing levels and critical thinking skills. Students also became familiar with 'quality' journals as they conducted their literature searches.

- The flow-on effect was evident in the higher level of performance in critically analysing cases. In addition, student performance in the mid-session exam (based on a case study) was higher than the previous year, with fewer failures.

- The ability to compare and contrast, to identify strengths and weaknesses in theoretical frameworks, and to generally evaluate the cross-cultural literature was evident in the reports written. These skills added to the quality of the work produced.

- The scaffolding of information literacy and critical writing skills certainly proved to be valuable to students in that they were able to work towards enhancing their skills over two sessions. It is hoped that improvement will continue over the entire time of study and in lifelong learning.

B. **PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED**

- Some students, especially those not used to independent learning strategies, found it difficult to select appropriate journal articles and needed a great deal of assistance. The large cohort size made it difficult to address the needs of all students.

- Some students from diverse backgrounds found it difficult to be critical of ‘experts’ in the field of Cross Cultural Management. Where learning support was provided, many of these students did not attend, citing ‘no time’ as a common reason. Clearly they would have benefited from the support classes.

- Despite being a first year course, the high proportion of second and third year students meant the approach to teaching had to target several levels rather than focus on the 'first years'. Particularly difficult (and of concern) was the assessment of student performance in relation to the tasks discussed.

**KEY ISSUES**

- Student performance showed improvement
- Exchange of ideas increased quality of work
- Independent learning model took time to gain acceptance

**QUOTES**

- “Case analysis was an enjoyable form of learning as you got to study and solve real life problems.”

- “More information needed on course website”

- “Student discussion page on website would be helpful”

- “No time to attend support classes”
FEEDBACK (EVALUATION) AND IMPROVEMENTS

FEEDBACK FROM COURSE:

- Feedback was obtained on each of the tasks discussed above from both tutors and students. Focus groups were held in tutorials and written reports were provided by each of the 6 tutors. On the basis of the feedback, adjustments will be made in 2003. These include:

  (a) More information on the course website e.g. links to resources for the assignments
  (b) The availability of samples of literature reviews and case analyses demonstrating best practice in critical writing
  (c) An earlier distribution of "Language for Critical Reviews" as students found these most useful, especially ESL students
  (d) Setting up of a student discussion page on the course website for each assignment (Only set up for the Report in this session)

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MORE INFORMATION

For more information on any aspect of this case study, please contact Prem Ramburuth (p.ramburuth@unsw.edu.au) from the School of International Business, Faculty of Commerce and Economics - http://www.ibus.unsw.edu.au.

"The presentation (based on the research report) was exciting. Our team wanted to really bring the business roles alive and show the comparisons, and so we created our role-play. We wanted to show what it really feels like when doing business with Japanese people...It's the best way of explaining and learning."