

A Day in the Life of a Manager: First Year Engagement through Active Learning

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Abstract

Engaging 21st century students has become increasingly important and challenging for teachers including those involved in management education. The literature indicates that the quality of the first year experience is positively related to a student's future tertiary experience, satisfaction and retention. This paper describes a successful approach to building student engagement and interest in the subject through an active learning experience entitled A Day in the Life of a Manager. The exercise has been used with almost 1000 students in over 200 organisations and the paper describes the process involved and reports on student responses to the exercise.

Introduction

Student engagement has been variously defined as coming from the inputs of time, energy and resources that are likely to facilitate high quality learning outcomes (ACER, 2008; Krause, 2005). Engaging first year students is important as the quality of their experiences is linked to enduring learning (McInnis, 2001; McInnis & James, 1995; Ramsden, 2003) and to student satisfaction and retention. (Bridges, 2003; Kift & Field 2009; Nelson, Clarke & Kift, 2009; Tinto, 2009). There is also evidence that enriching education experiences and engagement are falling short at many of our tertiary institutions (ACER, 2008; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005).

As teachers we strive to make learning conditions relevant, meaningful, and accessible to encourage students to engage in their own learning. We do this however against the backdrop of a vastly changed context in tertiary education in New Zealand. The reality is that there is now a broad spectrum of student ability and background in the first year with equally diverse external life factors, such as educational, language, and cultural diversity, paid work and other life commitments. (Krause, 2006; Yorke, 2006). The trends of lower attachment, engagement and commitment by students to study have also been noted (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Oblinger, 2003; Porter & Swing, 2006; Mason, Webber, Singleton & Hughes, 2006). Students today are also faced with an environment that is rich in media and creative opportunities outside of the classroom (Prensky, 2005). Today's students prefer questions to answers; they prefer participating, being involved in real world issues and people (Prensky, 2008; Stein, Isaacs & Andrews, 2004). This is just as true in business schools and the teaching of management (Burnett, 2008), particularly where students have little or no management experience to draw upon (Thompson, Finn & Best, 2007). Frequently we find ourselves challenged to 'inspire students with zero tolerance for delay' (Oblinger, 2003, p.4) and to engage them at their level.

The design of the first year curriculum can support such engagement when among other things it "... encourages students to be *active* in their learning" (Kift & Field, 2009, p. 2). Active learning in student engagement is widely supported, for example: active learning is one of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (ACER, 2008) six engagement scales; Tinto (1997) argues for students to be active and collaborative, noting that learning is not a spectator sport; while Biggs (2007, p. 79) identifies "learner activity and interacting with others" as being critical to engaging learning environments.

This paper focuses on a first year teaching and learning assessment that embodies an active learning philosophy, the key elements of which are: "keeping students mentally, and often physically, active in their learning through activities that involve interacting, information gathering, thinking, and problem solving" (Michael, 2006, p 160); as well as individual reflection on their understanding and ability to handle the ideas and concepts involved.

The Context

The first year management course is a compulsory course for all students enrolled in the four year Bachelor of Management degree. This course has between 250 to 400 enrolled students in each semester, the majority of whom come straight from secondary school with little or no work experience. Typically they have a limited idea of management and management concepts. Furthermore, they are a diverse audience coming from different faculties within the University, with different abilities and cultural backgrounds (25 to 30 per cent of the students are international, 80 percent of whom come from China). The course, Introduction to Management, aims to provide students with an understanding of the foundations of academic management namely, planning, organising, controlling and leading. The learning environment and assessments are purposefully designed to enable students to interact, gather information, problem solve, contribute to the class and reflect on their own learning. The learning outcomes for the course include the purpose, timing and steps for a major experience, *A Day in the Life of a Manager* (DIL), which is the focus of this paper.

***A Day in the Life of a Manager* (DIL): The Process**

The DIL assessment aims to expose students to activities that a manager typically faces in an average day. Since 2008, over 1000 first year students have undertaken the exercise interviewing over 200 managers in local organisations.

Active learning permeates the DIL exercise which is the beginning of their research journey (see Figure 2). In their tutorials, students collaborate and make decisions about the exercise. In sub-groups, four to five students identify and contact a manager asking for his/her cooperation and develop an interview schedule. The group then undertake a semi-structured interview, subsequently analysing their results and applying appropriate theoretical constructs. They then write a group report and make a fifteen minute presentation to their tutorial class. Figure 1 traces one group's process through the DIL.

The DIL presentation provides students with an opportunity to make a professional presentation relating their findings to relevant theory. Students are provided with a structure for the report which culminates with what stood out for them from the interview. It is in this section that they link the 'real life' data to the theory reflecting on what they have learned through the research process. A typical group response is,

"Although the information he gave us was not structured into specific textbook theories, we were able to connect what he told us to the planning, controlling, organising, and leading roles that are

discussed in the textbook..., the real world application of textbook theories is critical to the success of an organisation.”

Student Reflections

In addition, students submit a one page online individual reflection on the course which goes to a neutral faculty member at the end of the course. The responses are generally positive,

“This type of assessment was extremely insightful. It gave us a ‘real life’ picture and provided clarity of what an actual manager does, we were able to see how the theory we learnt is put into practice”.

Many students found that their stereotype of managers changed after DIL,

“I ... came into a management degree actually having no idea what is involved in being a manager. It was nice to be able to have a look at where we may be in four years time.”

Students also gain an alternative perspective into the work of a manager which is particularly evident in students who have no work experience. However some students with prior work experience expressed frustration with the DIL assessment,

“I did not find [it] useful or informative ... he only gave us an overview of his job and there wasn’t enough information to write any sort of relevant report. Everyone already knows that a manager does a variety of different jobs and has difficulty managing people.”

Conclusion

Lecture-based teaching is no longer sufficient to engage the interest and attention of 21st century students who are clearly looking to participate in real life issues. This is just as true of students of management, particularly when many have little or no management experience. Over several years with nearly 1000 students, the DIL experience has introduced first year students to their first research exercise undertaken in a real-world setting where they select, interview, analyse, write a report and then present their own findings. Students are able to relate the theoretical material they encounter in their classes to the realities managers face on a daily basis. For many students DIL has been the highlight of the ‘flagship’ Introduction to Management course, capturing their interest to pursue the discipline in the rest of their degree.

Figure 1. DIL Group Process: “The Pub”

The Pub group was made up of two New Zealand students and three international students. Initially they chose to interview a bank manager but he had been previously interviewed. The group then chose the manager of a local bar and restaurant.

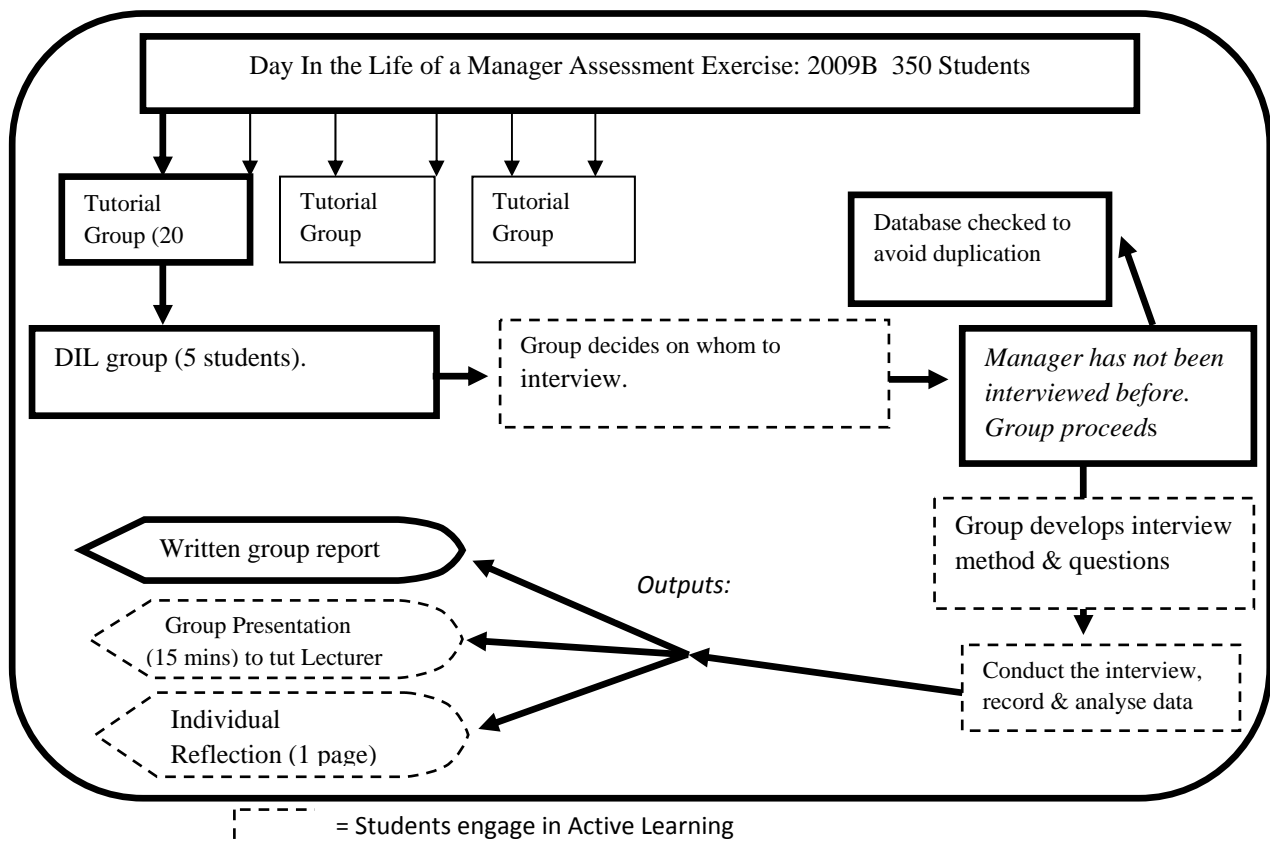
The group presentation was an enthusiastic and lively mixed media approach of video, audio, role play and power point.

- The group replayed their video of the manager in the actual work setting
- Students role-played a critical incident in a typical day of this pub manager.
- They used excerpts from their interview to illustrate the planning, controlling, organising, and leading roles.

This group was then invited to present in front of the entire lecture.

The group applied the four functions of management to the DIL but importantly they provided evidence of personal learning, effective group work, and problem solving.

Figure 2. Snapshot of DIL process



Session Plan: DIL

Time	Description	Resources
10 min	First Year Context Overview of Day In the Life of a Manager assessment What is involved in DIL report, presentation, reflective feedback Video example of DIL group presentation	PowerPoint presentation
8 min	Paired Discussion: Participants consider one or more of the following: 1) How would we ensure a supply of managers? 2) How do we engage the work experienced students? 3) How do we engage the international students who have different management practices in their home countries? Whole Group discussion: Draw together ideas and discuss if participants would consider implementing a similar initiative in their institution	PowerPoint presentation
10 min		
2 min	Video illustration of student responses	Video & sound

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