



Flipping a Graduate Classroom: Corporate Buying Project

Deborah C. Fowler, Texas Tech University

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Innovative Strategy

A graduate Retail Buying and Assortment Planning is taught each year, where students complete a buying and assortment planning project for a corporate retailer. Because of the nature of the projects and the level of expectations by the retailers, students must be engaged. During one of the presentations by the students, I began to realize in many ways I teach this class as a flipped classroom. According to the Flipped Learning network, “*Flipped Learning is a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter.*” (Flipped Learning Network, 2014, p. 1). Although my intent was not to develop a flipped classroom, many of the aspects cited by the network are incorporated in the classes including a flexible environment, a culture of learner-centered class time, securing intentional content, and relevant feedback in the moment.

Purpose

The purpose of this course and the method of instruction allows students to analyze corporate retail data to make decisions about the appropriate merchandising, assortment, and purchase of goods. The process enhances the students’ classroom experience by allowing them to apply the concepts learned in the curriculum to a real-life project. Although, students often see the project as the only important learning experience, the out-of-classroom activities are essential to the learning process and the success of the project. Students complete reading assignments and case studies outside of the classroom. There are also videos to clarify concepts.

Implementation

We always start the class meeting with each student “bringing something to the table” related to the project or the course topic, then moving on to incorporating their readings/videos into the project. Although all of the students work on all stages of the project, a single student takes responsibility for leading a stage of the project, for instance trends. The students send their research with the appropriate citation to the student leader. The student leader collates, organizes, and prepares that portion of the presentation. Instead of the instructor lecturing, students lead the class based upon their established area of leadership. I typically sit at one of the computers with the students as a collaborator, rather than taking the traditional instructor role.

The projects typically include determining micro and macro-trends, data analysis, SWOT analysis, and customer decision making trees. All projects include an in-depth analysis of the sales data for a single category for all stores in a chain, such as footwear. After we analyze the

data, we classify stores based on sales and other attributes, and make recommendations for their assortment for each store group. The retail client chooses the category of merchandise we analyze, after the completion of the project students present to corporate executives. Students realize the gravity of the projects and understand three credit hours does not accurately reflect the time spent in class nor outside of class. We meet with the executives the semester before we begin the project after signing confidentiality agreements. After this meeting the retailer sends the data. Each semester, I begin the class by preparing the students for the project and giving them out-of-class readings and assignments, such as a Harvard Business School case study and a new popular press business book, such as *America's Retail Value Proposition* by Murray.

Effectiveness of the Strategy and Continuation

Graduate students are comfortable contributing in class, but usually find this structure a little challenging in the beginning, but as the semester evolves, they begin to take ownership of the process and find the class enjoyable. These classes have successfully prepared students to enter major retailers' corporate offices. This fall students are completing a similar project for Academy Sports + Outdoors. Each semester I teach this class, I face a new challenge based upon the students taking the classes which requires an adjustment in the way I motivate and involve students. Sometimes they are engaged and excited, sometimes more passive. The number of students in the classes range from five to ten, and often their backgrounds are very different. I have had several students who have worked in the corporate world and returned to school for their masters, while others are very young recent college graduates. Some have a retail background, but often they do not. To bring together a very diverse group to perform at a relatively high level, a flipped classroom is ideal. By placing the onus of learning on the student the engagement level is magnified. One of the students in a recent group commented that in her entire undergraduate career, she had not presented as often as she had in the first two weeks of this class. Students realize the benefits of the flipped classroom, in that they feel better prepared to enter the corporate arena and were proud of their accomplishments. Students who have taken this class are now in corporate offices for Wal-Mart and Sam's Club, H-E-B, Academy Sports + Outdoors, Pier 1, United Supermarkets, Signet Jewellers, Stage Stores, 7-11, Maurice's Sporting Goods, Red Bull, Coca-Cola, Halliburton, JC Penney, Dr. Pepper Snapple Group, Sysco, Advanced Beauty (Sally's), and The Harvest Group.

Reference

Flipped Learning Network (March 12, 2014). Definition of Flipped Learning? Retrieved on March 1, 2017 <http://flippedlearning.org/definition-of-flipped-learning/>