

Business plan assignments for undergraduate students 213

Seemita Mohanty offers a tool for fostering creativity and critical thinking

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Today in India, creative and critical thinking skills among school children is a rarity as our education system emphasizes scoring high marks which leads to rote learning. The kind of education imparted in most schools is largely teacher-driven. Since the focus is more on discipline, students are made to listen and follow and not question. Such an environment can never foster curiosity or creativity. The ability to ask questions is central to the learning process but students are rarely encouraged to speak inside the classroom. Also with the number of students exceeding fifty in most classes, the majority of the students never get a chance to interact.

The situation in higher education

When these students get into higher education, particularly engineering courses which are arguably the single most lucrative career option for most of our youngsters (as evident from the 400, 000 students who appeared for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) conducted on 12th April 2009 for admission to nearly 6000 seats in the 15 Indian Institutes of Technology and a few other central institutes; *source*: India Edunews.net), they still retain with them the school habit of not interacting in classrooms. In most technical institutes it is basically a one way process where the students just listen and take notes. Direct oral feedback by the author from 2nd year Bachelor of Technology (BTech) students at the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Rourkela elicited the fact that they found only those classes interesting and exciting where the classes are interactive, but these types of classes are few and far between. Multiple interactions inside the classrooms are a critical component to make classes interesting, which ultimately makes learning easier. Interactive classes also make the students lose their inhibitions and get started on the path of critical thinking and inquiry. They gradually lose their fear to oppose viewpoints and question assumptions.

The assignment

At NIT, Rourkela, Language Lab is a compulsory 2 credit lab course for all the 2nd year BTech students and each session comprises 30-40 students of one particular engineering branch. In these 3-hourly lab sessions each week, along with the language learning multimedia resources that the students access in self-study mode, other related assignments are given regularly to make the sessions interesting and meaningful. Business plan group assignment is an innovative way of encouraging students to plan, question and challenge. Students are divided into groups of four or five and given a week to formulate their business venture plans. Students at any level of education can use the concept of preparing a business plan as a method of exploring avenues for starting a business. It is basically a series of questions that leads them to think about the requirements and the possibilities of any kind of business. This assignment makes them think like an entrepreneur. They start to ask questions that enable them to visualize the details necessary to be successful in a business:

- providing a description of the business
- deciding on the location of the business
- researching the current market trends of similar business ventures

- choosing the best marketing strategy
- identifying the management plan
- analyzing the finances needed
- evaluating the sustainability of the venture
- designing a logo or maxim that represents the company's objectives, mission, values, targets etc

This assignment revealed really interesting results. Because they are engineering students most of their business plans centered on technology-related products. Mechanical engineering students came up with plans centering on automobiles and alternative fuel resources; electronics and electrical students mostly concentrated on digital communication, mobile services and their easy availability to the common man; computer students' creations involved gaming business and robotics. Along with these technologically innovative ideas, they also formulated plans of starting business ventures on such varied areas as food and beverages, setting-up tutorials and private colleges, establishing enterprises which would focus on the gap in the agricultural sector, setting up retail businesses etc. All this planning and analyzing encouraged them to innovate, create and question.

When the students presented their ideas to the class, it was a group presentation where each student spoke on one particular aspect of the business for around 5-6 minutes, out of a total presentation time of 30 minutes for each group. During the post-presentation discussions the group had to defend their plan against the barrage of questions that came from their classmates. Along with the anticipated questions, they also faced some completely unexpected questions which provided food for thought. Sometimes, somebody from the audience came up with a constructive suggestion for the business-plan under discussion, which was appreciated unanimously.

The question-answer sessions became really animated with attacks and counter-attacks going on at rapid-fire speed. These verbal attacks implicitly prepared the students to counter hostile questions. The sessions were a practice pitch for them, building confidence, improving self-esteem, developing speaking and presentation skills, and best of all fostering team-spirit among the group members. Inadvertently, almost without realizing, even if for a limited period of time, they were working in a cohesive unit stoutly defending their home and hearth from hostile forces. It also cultivated leadership skills, with one or two students in each group taking the lead in planning the ventures, organizing the varied thoughts, coordinating among the group members and leading the defence during the question-answer session.

The Advantages

Undergraduate students, being young adults, it becomes all the more necessary to give them real-life opportunities to practise making decisions about a business of their own. The practice of business planning is an experience important for the learning process. Every time a student makes decisions, the possibility of really starting a business becomes more tangible. In the classroom it facilitates in shifting the learning process from being teacher-centric to student-centric.

The feedback from the students after the sessions was extremely positive. The students were unanimous in their appreciation of the assignment, which they said helped them to overcome their reluctance to ask questions and interact in class. This attitude will hold them in good stead both in their academic and professional careers. They also learnt a great deal from observing and thinking critically about the other groups' presentations. Thus, having students explore

possibilities, research and collaborate with other students can influence and greatly enhance the language learning process.