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Context and Job Opportunities

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Abstract: This action research presents a description of how an on-line E-commerce business-planning unit was developed. Initially, an intensive ten-day E-commerce course was developed in collaboration with government, industry and university sectors with a view of raising awareness and promoting electronic business planning issues. The course utilised a range of learning approaches, including peer teaching, in which participants were trained as team leaders to facilitate group learning. Based on the evaluation of this course, a full semester course for final year tertiary studentswas developed and evaluated. An overview of both case studies is given with recommendations for future developments.

The Need for E-commerce Training and Awareness

The rapid increase of Internet usage is demanding that businesses update their skills and re-engineer their organisations, products and services to meet new competitive demands both locally and globally. This is not only providing immense opportunity and threat for small, medium and large businesses at a micro-economic level, but is posing similar opportunities at a macro-economic level (Turban et al. 2000). Training is needed to support these changes that require equipping business operators with new skills and forms of information literacy. These demands raise some critical issues for educators, such as how to structure "rapid" training while at the same time keep pace with technology and business issues. How can large numbers of business operators be quickly trained in on-line technology? How can E-commerce strategies be quickly implemented by business to take advantage of this new revolution?

University courses spanning over three years duration will not provide the body of knowledge or skills needed by Australian business to compete in this rapidly changing marketplace. Training and development courses need to have ongoing collaboration and mentoring with industry to ensure the knowledge acquired is current and relevant (Mitchell, 2000).

Case Studies – Intensive and Semester Based Training Courses

In September 1999, a group of ninety, second year multimedia degree students from Edith Cowan University completed a two week intensive E-commerce business-planning course. They had no previous instruction in business planning and minimal understanding of E-commerce issues. Participants were required to develop an E-commerce business plan,

which could be sustained economically by a business to sell products in an on-line environment. The course was subsidised by the Office of Information and Communications (OIC), which is part of the Department of Commerce of Trade, a Government department in Western Australia. Dow Digital (an E-commerce and on-line services consultancy and development company) developed the course and was subsidised to run it at Edith Cowan with a view of evaluating its effectiveness for university graduates in Australia, as well as how it could be implemented in third world countries.

In order to ensure relevant, authentic content, there was daily input by E-commerce experts and local business representatives that had established E-commerce as part of their business. "Just-in-time Learning" principles were used to deliver the course that focused on integrating students' knowledge base into real life contexts and engaging learners in collaborative project work (Erhaut, 1994; Ben-Jacob & Levin, 2000). This is supported by constructivist learning principles which emphasise social interaction, communication, exchange of views, collaboration and support for learners to take more responsibility for the learning process through learner-centred tasks (McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; McLoughlin & Oliver, 1998; Collis, 1998). Learning tasks required students to work collaboratively to create an E-commerce business plan and share the expertise of the group. Thus, collaborative learning, peer communication and negotiation were key elements of the learning approach. The course culminated in the students presenting their plans to a panel of E-commerce experts, members of local industry and their peers after the 10 days of intensive instruction.

A questionnaire was designed to elicit student and industry views on the value of the course. Results of the questionnaire were very positive, showing that students and industry representatives considered the course to be very worthwhile which was strongly reflected in point 8 of the questionnaire ("Overall, I though that the course was very worthwhile"), which rated 3.9 out of 4. From feedback gained, a number of conclusions were made: a two week intensive course is too short; the course is better suited to final year, final semester students; teams should be involved in developing more authentic business plans; team size should be no greater than four and students needed more help on creating budgets using spreadsheets.

On the basis of the two week intensive program, a full semester E-commerce business planning course was developed and implemented for final year, final semester multimedia students. A web site was set up for students to obtain the syllabus, chat on bulletin boards, download weekly notes/PowerPoint slides and contribute to an on-line "URL catcher". Students were given the opportunity to enter a business planning competition promoted by the Software Engineering Association of Western Australia (SEAWA) and sponsored by the Western Australian government. Successful teams were given four days of free training as well as notes and advice about how to build their business plans. All students were encouraged to use "real" business clients who wanted to move their businesses on-line. At the end of the semester, students presented their plans to peers, staff and industry representatives. (see http://www-scam.ecu.edu.au/projects/Business_Plans/BusinessPlans.htm).

Students were interviewed and questionnaires given to all participants in an attempt to evaluate the course. There was unanimous agreement that the course provided information

and ideas that would help students gain employment, and also generate ideas for their own businesses. They also enjoyed the tutorial discussion sessions were contemporary E-commerce topics from newspapers, magazines and the textbook (Turban et al, 2000) were discussed by students and tutors. On the negative side, students felt the course did not integrate business-planning concepts with the weekly content well enough and would have preferred structured tutorial activities each week that would have contributed to the overall development of a business plan, with the E-commerce knowledge derived from the book tied into the business-planning structure.

Conclusion

The E-Commerce business-planning course was developed through a joint venture with business, government and Edith Cowan University. On the basis of a subsidised two-week course, a full semester-based course was developed for final year students. Overall, the course was well received by students and industry but was found to be deficient in structured business planning concepts.

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