The Class Business

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Academic Support Centers

As a student at Ricks College in 1999, I took an introductory literature class from Kendall Grant. He started the first day of class not with an introduction but by instructing us to follow him. He led us to the Hart building, where he asked us to obtain swimming suits, change into them in the locker rooms, and meet him by the pool. As I did so, I wondered what I had gotten myself into.

At the pool, Brother Grant was holding a laminated copy of “Fish in an Aquarium.” After instructing us to get in the water, he read us the poem. He then told us that if we really wanted to learn in the course, we needed to swim—in other words, get out of our comfort zones. As I considered his lesson, I realized that my involvement was key to my learning. I took that challenge seriously and became a leader in the class as I took projects and preparation to a higher level than I would have if I had not been challenged by Brother Grant.

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Today, I am a course instructor and am responsible for helping students “swim”—that is, invest in what they’re learning. I’ve used a checklist style of teaching in the past that can cause courses to feel stagnant; today, I use another structure that can help students think differently about what they’re doing at BYU–Idaho and about the priority they’re giving their education.

Perception Change

I begin by asking students to evaluate their perceptions of a university course and identify their roles and responsibilities within it. How are they able to balance all of the things they are asked to do? I allow them to discuss these questions with their classmates. I then introduce a new way of thinking about school by asking additional questions: What will life be like after they graduate? What are the similarities and differences between work and school? As students share, I write their thoughts on the whiteboard. The conversation typically involves accountability, deadlines, and possible punishments for failing to complete assignments.

I then announce that their experience in the class will mirror a business structure. They will be required to accomplish tasks by a deadline with little or no reminders. I tell them that they are to organize themselves and create their own checklists.

I then introduce the concept of “payment” for their work, attendance, and preparation. I explain that they will be paid in “Haacke Bucks” according to the tasks, reports, and presentations they accomplish at a professional level. I tell students that they need to earn a certain amount of money by the end of the semester in order to purchase their A.

Students typically have mixed feelings at this point in the discussion, but as their questions are answered, they often express excitement; their perceptions have changed, and they start thinking about their assignments and grades differently than they have in the past.

To conclude the first day of class, I distribute employee handbooks (the equivalent of the syllabus) and introduce the contract.

The Contract

Contracts are often new and intimidating to students, so I walk them through it and assure them that they will not be held responsible for anything that is not in the contract. In other words, the class—our business—involves no tricks or surprises. The contract is set up to clearly define students’ roles and tasks as well as the rules of the class. I let them know that they will have time to read the handbook and negotiate their contracts’ terms, but once each contract is signed, there will be no further negotiations. Each student has a contract tailored to his
or her needs and desires. This usually results in each student having different earning potential as well.

Students often have a number of questions and may feel overwhelmed by the new perspective, which causes change in the way they view the teacher-student relationship. I ask them to think of me not as a teacher, but as a boss. In addition, the students think of themselves as employees. While this is not literally the case, the mentality of the classroom changes. They have more control over their desired outcomes. It becomes a “chose your own adventure” class.

The Negotiation

Before contracts are signed, a one-on-one interview is set up for each employee with their boss. Each interview is no longer than 20 minutes. I require Students to come prepared, having read the employee handbook, to negotiate their contracts. Within the handbook, there are a number of required items to do at the Boss’s prerogative, but there are other items they can choose to do. These tasks are accomplished in order to earn more money to purchase grades. They are supposed to come to interviews with plans for what they want to do, and then negotiations start.

As employees reveal tasks that they want to do and those they are willing to do, the amount of money they can potentially earn is clearly stated. Upon agreement, the employee signs the contract. The student then plan their upcoming days according to this contract. They set the due dates for their tasks themselves as they begin to work through their contact and deadlines to earn money. The boss will never call for the assignment or task until the deadline has been reached.

Board Meetings

Classes are no longer classes; they are board meetings. The employees come to board meetings ready with their tasks or meeting agenda items. The discussion begins with employees presenting ideas and expressing their opinions or their research. There are times that tasks are due during the board meeting, and I give them time to present those tasks to their coworkers and boss. The boss pays them according to the work they have done and their attendance at board meetings.

Earning your Grade

Students are “paid” for everything they do in the business. This includes attendance and participation. They will receive compensation for things they negotiated on their contracts, and they fill out weekly reports. Some of those weekly reports may include devotional attendance and reporting or other presentations like TED talks or self-made speaking service.

I require some presentations and activities for students to do as part of the business. These are things that, as their boss, I want each employee to experience, and I compensate them accordingly. For example, I require group presentations in the form of debates. Students are compensated for their preparation, presentation, and performance regardless of who wins these debates. Another mandatory project is the TED talks event. This is the main event of the business, and everything builds up to this. This
is discussed in many of our board meetings and worked on from the beginning of their employment.

It is important to note at this time that each employee is also given a job in the center according to what each would like to do for a career. These jobs range from photographer to event planner. Each student understands the parameter of this job and each can get started on it as soon as he or she likes. Each completed project is compensated according to how much estimated time it should take. Often, the projects are of high quality because it is something students want to do. I tie most of the jobs to the TED talk days, so it becomes a special day and not just another speech day.

In addition to mandatory activities, there are optional activities that each employee picks as a way to shape their class experience. Employees can choose activities to pad their portfolios according to their majors or emphases. Each activity is designed to give them experience in something they may do in the future or that they have a passion for. Some of those activities are problem/solution presentations, YouTube presentations (filming and editing), teaching, press releases, and advertising campaigns. I try to make this as student-oriented as possible so students feel it is not a waste of time and is something they are excited to do.

Pay Stubs
A weekly paystub is a reoccurring account of what students have earned with feedback according to their projects. They can then adjust their projects as needed to ensure they earn the highest possible income. These reports include feedback from the employer with the amount of their compensation, which comes in the form of a performance review. Employees will provide feedback on their projects themselves so they can track their progress. All of this feedback and information is collected and then used in a rubric for their final project, the TED talk. Each rubric fits the needs and progress of each employee (student) so he or she sees individual growth and not comparisons to others in the business (class).

Purchase Grade
As mentioned before, I require employees to earn a predetermined amount in order to purchase A’s. They can overshoot possible earning with projects and presentations, which is encouraged, as they will not likely earn the full potential of each project. Many students shoot beyond the mark so they can ensure they can purchase their A at the end of the semester. I caution, however, that each project needs to be completed to the best of their abilities and that if there is work not fit for the business, they can be docked in pay or fined. This dock in pay discourages students from signing up for as many projects as possible only to accomplish the projects with subpar work.

Fines
If the employer’s expectations are not met, then it is naturally reflected on the employee’s pay. However, there are also times when deadlines are missed or contracts broken. When this is the case, students are fined in various amounts. For example, an employee (student) once set up an appointment with me and did not show up. I waited for five minutes. I checked my e-mail to see if there were
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any communication attempts for the missed appointment. When I found none, I left my office after sending the employee an e-mail indicating that he had been fined for the missed appointment.

Upon finding this, the student set up another appointment to discuss the fine. The employee felt it was a harsh punishment for a simple mistake. I then taught him the importance of keeping his word, especially as an employee. I continued to teach that he should never stand up the boss, especially if he is the one requesting the meeting. When he understood the magnitude of what he had done, we realized that it was an oversight on his part because he had scheduled the appointment when he was still in class. The fine was discussed and ultimately retained, mainly because he never communicated with me about the error until he was already fined. A fine may also occur if a contract item is not fulfilled on time. I understand that there are times that it may not be feasible to fulfill a signed contract. If that is the case, students are allowed a way to re-negotiate their contract.

Petitions and Amendments

I allow Employees to change their contracts, but changes need to be in the form of petitions or amendments. Petitions need to be done in ample time (usually 24 hours) in order for the review board (the Teacher’s Assistant and myself) to review their contract. It is then decided if students are granted their petitions and what possible fines will accompany each. They can petition their contracts a maximum of 3 times. There are usually only one or two petitions a semester.

Amendments, on the other hand, are different as they are additions to contracts. If students feel they are falling short of their goals they can add additional projects along the way to help buffer the load and increase their potential earnings. They can amend their contracts as many times as they like. Because this is an addition to a contract, it still goes to the review board, but is often granted, as it is additional work for the students. The board clarifies the parameters and compensation, and if the employee agrees, the amendment is added to the contract.

I honestly feel there is a power in allowing students to choose. This usually results in a higher quality of product and effort. There will always be a handful of students who do not find this motivating. However, the majority find a class like this refreshing.

Principles Taught

Responsibility — Although there is a company calendar, it does not have all the deadlines that exist in the business because of all the individual projects that come into play. Employees are responsible to check their contracts and fulfill deadlines. Most of the time, as the boss of the organization, I show up to class with a general idea of what needs to be done, and the students come prepared to report on their projects or give their presentations. Often times, the students will set the agenda for the day by wanting or needing to report on their assignments. I imagine a time that I may be running late (not on purpose) only to find the meeting had already started and each student is invested in doing the duties he or she is contracted to do.

Accountability — One of the projects is the TED talk at the end of the semester. These are not just TED talks, but a collaborative effort where other students are assigned to participate in the event. Roles include event planner, master of ceremony, entertainment, videographer, photographer, and the speakers. Each person has a separate part of the event they are held accountable for. I usually don't need to hold them accountable as they do
that themselves as coworkers. It becomes apparent who is not pulling their weight when it comes to these projects and they are compensated accordingly and sometimes fined. They not only hold themselves responsible but there is a high sense of accountability to each other. The deadlines are set, and their groups are often set up near the first of the semester where they are holding each other accountable for what needs to be done. Event coordinator Paige Jensen, a communication major studying public relations, said, “I wish I would have organized a dress rehearsal.” She then went on to say that when it comes to technology she could have been in better control of the event if she would have known how to do certain things. Paige was able to make these mistakes in a safe environment but is held accountable by her coworkers and not her boss.

**Investment** — Because the employees are doing the things that they are interested in, their work is usually at a higher level. Instead of just showing up for class to listen to what I want to share with them, they put themselves in control of the situation and take responsibility for their learning. Denton Isaacs, another communication student, said, “I am able to play to my strengths. It makes me feel good when I know that I am going to do something that I know I’ll be good at.” The employees (students) invest in their learning at a level that cannot be found unless they are empowered by opportunity.

**Accomplishment** — Finding something the students are interested in provides the passion needed to take a good activity or project and make it great. The employees are making something that they really want to show off. Many of the employees display their work in their e-portfolio and

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often put additional thought into their projects because they are excited and passionate about them.

Repetition — I encourage Employees are to apply things they have already learned in other classes into their projects and presentations. They are to take the principles learned and re-apply them in a way that is more meaningful. It becomes something they put effort and time into. Perfect practice makes permanent, and with invested application comes a project they are really proud of. Hopefully this reapplication of formerly understood principles creates a pattern of effective behavior for the future. Because this is a senior level class, they have learned a lot previously that they are encouraged to re-apply as they work for the business. These principles range from public relations to organizational communication (as this is a communication course).

This process is a work in progress, and it does take time to fulfill if done properly. I feel there are lessons learned through taking this class. It may be because it is set up differently than a checklist class. I am allowing students to make choices that allow them to swim.

Responsibility, accountability, investment, accomplishment, and repetitive application are a few of principles I hope the students learn by attending my class. It will be much more than a class to them. It will be a class that they earned rather than took. It will be a class that they invested in rather than showed up for. It will be a class that they dove into and swam.

I wanted to empower them instead of dictating their workload. In order for my students to adopt the style of learning that I want for them, I had to shock them like I was shocked the first day of Brother Grant’s class. I needed to change their perspective of class and what was expected of them.

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