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CASE STUDY

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSES AT AMSIB

WITH EDUBOOK ACADEMIC AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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INTRODUCTION

At AMSIB, Amsterdam School of International Business, we have offered Personal Development courses as an integral part of our Bachelor of Business Administration program for more than 10 years. The program, which consists of three main courses: Personal Development (PD) 1 & 2 in year one, Professional Branding (PB) in year 2 and Advanced Leadership Skills (ALD) in year 4, has undergone many iterations over the years, as we have strived to achieve the goal of matching key learning goals with the interests and needs of our students. By establishing our learning outcomes, taking our time to find the right structure for the course by integrating our own content and assignments with the modules from the Edubook *Academic and Employability Skills*, we managed to put together a program that is satisfactory to both students and teachers.

Our main learning goals have always been to enhance the personal growth and self-reflection of the students, to enable them to be continuous learners with a growth mindset and capable of self-reflection and improvement. From research we have done in the professional field as well as setting our sights on other business schools, we realized that this is the current direction where our students and alumni can stand out and define themselves as future leaders in the business world.

In addition, we needed to comply with the Netherland's government Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO's) for International Business studies at the University of Applied Sciences level. These (directly below) are taken from "The Framework for International Business," (Slijben, Stoelinga, Molenaar and Ubachs, 2017)[1].

[1]*Sijben, G., Stoelinga, B., Molenaar A., Ubachs, M. (2017). Framework International Business. Profile, Programme LearningOutcomes and Process Background of the Bachelor of Business Administration Programme International Business. National Platform International Business. (pp. 24-25)*

WAYS OF WORKING & LIVING IN THE WORLD

The areas covered (at least in part) by our Personal Development courses in these intended learning outcomes were:

- Communicate (business) messages effectively and persuasively using advanced English to an (un)informed audience.

- Collaborate effectively with different kinds of stakeholders, in different cultural, organisational and political landscapes to contribute to achieving agreed upon goals.

- Express reflections on one's personal development with the aim of personal growth.

- Respond appropriately to an unfamiliar, or unexpectedly changing, business environment.

- Formulate one's own position concerning ethical and social responsibility in a professional environment.

- Display willingness to work with people from other cultures and to work in countries with different cultural backgrounds.

- Use appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication in an intercultural setting.

BACKGROUND

Our team consists of dedicated teachers in the Personal Development and Culture Learning Line, many of whom have had training as coaches in the business world. Despite our capable team, it had been quite a struggle to engage the students in a meaningful way. We had consistently achieved an average of about 5.6 in Student Evaluations of the first year Personal Development courses, while courses such as Marketing and Finance received average grades of 7 or higher. Feedback told us that the students didn't really appreciate the 'soft skills' they were learning, especially at this stage, in the first year of their studies.

In October 2017, we began a curriculum-wide redesign, using what is known as "Blended Learning." This meant we would have the students prepare before class, work interactively and answer questions in class, and give homework after class.

By chance, Edumundo was presenting their interactive electronic study programs at a networking event at our school. They already had a personal development course (the Edubook Academic & Employability Skills) which had been developed for the Dutch Business School curriculum at University level, and it was geared towards a blended learning style course.

TIMELINE

Sept 2017 – August 2018 – Course re-development
During this period, we aligned the forementioned ILO's with our own feedback from students, staff and the business world, and developed our Learning Objectives. Next came the daunting task of redesigning a new Personal Development course for year 1, using the Edubook and keeping in mind the Intended Learning Outcomes.

Learning Objectives (from PD1 & PD2 module guides)[2]

1. Demonstrate self-reflection on own skills and strengths as well as describe areas to be further developed – through STARR and other self-reflection methods.
2. Demonstrate teamwork and collaboration skills.
3. Proactively seek and come up with solutions to problems that may arise.
4. Demonstrate professional communication skills, especially feedback and active listening.
5. Demonstrate professional presentation skills including self-knowledge and reflection skills through use of creative media.

Sept 2018 – July 2019 – first year of PD1 & PD2; also second year course PB1 redevelopment
The first year, we saw as a trial (by fire) year, in which we paid close attention to how easy (or difficult) it was to:

- teach the course,
- understand and complete the course from a student's perspective and
- how close we were able to achieve the learning objectives.

We made a few adjustments to the original course plan, mainly paying attention not to overload the students with too much work pre-class, (as Edumundo consultants had already warned us), and adjusted our own assessment model, including STARR reflections for each criterion we wanted to check.

Sept 2019 – July 2020 – second year of PD1 & PD2; first year second year new course PB1
This year we were truly able to enjoy the fruit of our labor. The lecturers and students were able to use the Edubook easily, the students were able to work autonomously in the Edubook, without much extra explanation, and the results were clearly positive in the module assessments (done by students after the module was completed).

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS WITH EDUMUNDO

The development process in cooperation with Edumundo started with learning what was on offer. We met with the Edumundo team and went through their existing program with a small team. We decided what we could use directly from the Edubook Academic & Employability Skills and determined which parts needed to be adjusted to fit our needs. One of the focus points in redesigning our course was keeping the workshops aligned with our core learning goals.

Together with Edumundo we customized the Edubook to our needs. The process can be summarized as follows:

1. Changing the order of material
2. Adding some of our own material, links to outside videos etc.
3. Adding our own powerpoints/workshop material
4. Adding our own assignments for homework
5. Checking the translation work (which had been done over the summer)
6. First block – trial run, evaluating efficiency with team & students
7. Feedback to Edumundo – fast and flexible cooperation on fixing bugs and content where needed
8. Year 2: Reducing some of the pre-class content in Edumundo

THE NEW COURSE STRUCTURE (PD1)

Our new PD1 program is as follows:

Week 1:	Kickoff with guest speakers from the business world and Q&A from 2nd year students introducing the course.
Week 2:	Study Skills: Focus on time management & different study methods.
Week 3:	Personality Preference: Based on the MBTI – helps the students to know themselves, realize their strengths and areas to further develop and appreciate their peers.
Week 4:	Team Roles: Based on Belbin – supporting the teamwork students are engaged with in many other first year courses.
Week 5:	Communication: Especially active listening and feedback skills practice.
Week 6:	Public speaking – students learn how to present.
Week 7 & 8:	Final presentations.

In addition to the above, the students also have two other obligations:

· Engage in a mini-project (20 hours) of self-study in an area of their interest, by reading a book, listening to podcasts, doing an internship or volunteer work.
· Conduct two business interviews with internationally focused managers, in order to begin to familiarize themselves with the business world.

The focus is to have the students learn about themselves as individuals and as team players, and to learn to perform as students and future international business people. They are encouraged to participate actively in this course by doing the following obligatory activities:

1. Preparation of work in the Edubook, prior to the weekly workshop.
2. Interactive workshop in small groups (usually about 15 students per group).
3. Post-workshop reflection in Edubook – and STARR reflection.

THE NEW PD2 STRUCTURE

Our new PD2 program is as follows:

Week 1:	The World and I – Looking at less fortunate communities and how each person can set a goal to help in their unique way.
Week 2:	Motivation – Students learn about how to recognize where their motivation lies (intrinsic or extrinsic) and how to self-motivate.
Week 3:	Time management and organization skills.
Week 4:	Conflict resolution skills – Based on feedback, active listening and learning to differentiate their own emotions from that of the other.
Week 5:	Trust and delegation – Flipped class where the students learn and teach about these topics.
Week 6:	Class party or event – Some classes use this opportunity to raise money while others enjoy the community they have formed.
Week 7 & 8:	Pecha Kucha presentations – Encouraging interesting and creative presentations.

PD2 focuses not only on the students' personal development, but also on the community at large, of school, the Netherlands and the world. We encourage students to go outside of their small personal worlds and reflect on how they might be able to contribute to a more sustainable and ethical world in the future.

In order to accomplish focus on the community, we were able to combine some of the Edubook elements with our workshops and created the following structure:

Students also complete another mini-project, while this time there is a strong emphasis on the world community, non-profit, etc. And they conduct 2 business interviews with people working in non-profit or sustainability.

RESULTS OF OUR EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

We were very happy to discover, from our module evaluation scores, a marked improvement in how the students value this course. While in the past we had scores just hovering above 5.6 for Personal Development courses, we have now achieved scores ranging from 6.5 up to 8 (varies per lecturer/class).

We see the students actively engaged in the workshops, because they have done the work at home, prior to class.

The students appear to have better integrated our teaching into other courses as well and have matured well in their self-development during the year. For example, when given feedback, many students are able to incorporate this, rather than defend their stance.

The PD teaching staff has adjusted well to the new curriculum and finds it much less challenging and in some cases even a pleasure to teach. We had one lecturer, for example, who was a new teacher and new to the course. The clear structure, the teacher's dashboard and the students' participation made the experience a good one, and she is happy to continue to teach this course next year. From a team perspective, we were all working on the exact same material, and in the same method. This made it easier for us to share ideas and to collaborate. It felt like using the Edubook taught us a few things about teamwork, as well.

REFLECTION & RECOMMENDATIONS

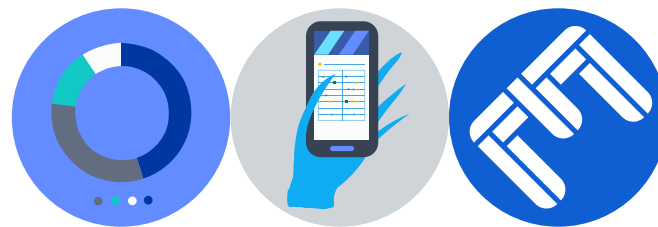There is no single "right way" to teach personal development, and there are many elements to take into consideration, including governments' Intended Learning Outcomes (if those are applicable in other countries), trends in the business world, how well trained and enthusiastic staff is, and how much time and effort the university will agree to contribute to the success of the program.

In our case, AMSIB has always prided itself on putting a strong emphasis on empowering students to self-reflect and to continue to self-develop. This is reflected in our ability to teach them in small groups in the first year and to develop this new program. We have a total of three PD programs, the final one not using the Edubook (our 4th year Advanced Leadership Development course uses the book "Designing Your Life"), and we further encourage self-reflection by assessing our Internship students with STARR forms.

As one of the main developers of the new first-year PD programs, I was impressed by how flexible the Edumundo staff was to customize their software/e-course for us, to correct any typos/mistakes in a short time, to add new sections for us and design the course on a week-by-week basis, to follow how we teach this course. They invested a lot of time and resources to make sure the language was up to par – as it had been written in Dutch, originally, and they always react quickly and with a smile to our emails and requests to meet up and discuss matters.

Edumundo was kind enough to also offer training sessions for the teaching staff, on how to use the Tutor's Dashboard (which provides insight on each student's progress and allows teachers to easily provide students with feedback on the completion of their assignments) and how to implement the Edubook with the blended learning method. Another advantage of using the Edubook is that the students purchase the book for a reasonable price and so our university did not have to make any initial investment, apart from time, into this project.

If it were up to me, I would encourage other departments of our school, (and other schools as well), to use a similar method (blended learning with an Edubook) for other courses. It makes learning easy to follow for students and easier to teach for lecturers.

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