Improving Student Performance and Faculty Evaluation:

A Transactional Relationship Strategy

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Abstract

As in any relationship between buyer and seller, the educational transaction between learner and teacher requires that a level of receptivity be created so that features, advantages and benefits of the transaction can be examined. Student responses to instructor efforts to create a vested covenant in the classroom were evaluated. Teaching methods were altered in two of four course sessions taught by the instructor. When efforts were made to gain student ownership of the class, both student grades and teacher evaluations improved.

"Students learn what they care about and remember what they understand."

The Essence of Good Teaching (p. 51)

"To be successful, a salesperson must be able to find and address the dominant buying motive of each client."

Relationship Selling (p. 65)

Today's consumers do not want to be sold; they want to be provided with solutions to problems (Webster). This requires a change from the traditional product oriented sales approach to a partner driven, solution driven relationship. According to Cathcart (p. 1), "Relationship Selling is focused on building a good relationship with someone and providing a valuable service through that relationship." Salespeople have rediscovered the importance of listening to customers, and quickly learn that by listening they can determine customer needs (Wilson). The innovation and quality aspects of this re-awakening then help to provide what many sales professionals seek --- growth and a level of satisfaction that can only come from solving real problems.

People buy because they have needs which can be met, or perceived to be met, by the products or solutions being sold. But the salesperson doesn't act alone in the transaction, selling is interactual, meaning that it involves at least two people (Buzzotta, Lefton and Sherberg). When the transaction yields mutually beneficial results, both parties have performed together, equally. This relationship is then defined by a degree of trust, and the selling environment is established to be safe, friendly and based upon two-way communication.

Success in the new millennium classroom requires that educators also break free of traditional pedagogical paradigms and recognize that they must capitalize on student's existing needs (Davis, pp.193-94). Educators must accept that a variety of learning styles exist and adapt their teaching methods in order to facilitate the learning process. A positive classroom environment is comfortable and non-threatening, a place where expectations are exchanged between teacher and student (Davis). Part of the goal in moving young minds from a dualistic intellect to a more relativistic stage, requires that the student accept that what is being taught has value, not only educational value, but value worth entering into a transactional relationship. This transaction occurs when the learner makes a rational decision to exchange dollars, time, and energy for the knowledge and experience offered by the instructor. As in any relationship between buyer and seller, the transaction requires that a level of receptivity be created so that features, advantages and benefits of the transaction can be examined and evaluated.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of using adaptive sales techniques in the classroom on student performance and instructor evaluations. Creating a receptive environment, listening, needs analysis, motivation, problem solving, and partnership are all equally important ingredients to the sales transaction, whether the product be a tractor, ton of feed, or an educational concept (Schunk). Where Buzotta, Lefton and Sheberg profile buyer and seller behaviors, Davis profiles learner and teacher behaviors. Like buyers and sellers, recognition that all students and instructors are unique provides a basic opportunity for communication, participation and maximized learning. Just as the product driven salesperson of old, many educators tend to focus a majority of their attention on the “product” they have to “sell” rather than identifying student needs, recognizing objections or obstacles to success, and maximizing student learning.

Selling in the Classroom

Similarities between buyer - seller, and student - teacher relationships are profound, especially to those that have operated on both sides of the transaction in both types of relationship. At the simplest level, teaching and selling both deal with the transfer of goods or services between parties that may be somewhat resistant to the transaction. In both situations, steps can be taken that will create an environment which is conducive to breaking down barriers to the transaction. Needs can then be identified and met to the mutual satisfaction and benefit of both parties. Recommendations as to how this can be achieved will be presented in five steps (Buzzotta, Lefton and Sheberg, pp. 182-87).

<u>Step One: Developing a Pre-Call Plan</u>

Any successful selling situation begins with a Pre-Call Plan. The pre-call plan provides the salesperson with their plan of attack. It identifies the target audience, information to be discovered, possible products of interest, how the first interaction or “opening” will be conducted, materials needed, and a specific strategy for creating a positive environment, or “spinning receptivity.”

A teaching situation requires no less advance preparation. The initial lesson plan should identify:

- who is expected to be taking the course (undergraduate or graduate students)
- information that might be beneficial to know (grade level, previous course experience in the subject area, related work experience, student expectations, is the class required or an elective)
- an initial outline of course content (preliminary syllabus)
- required materials (overhead projector, handouts, student surveys and data sheets)
- what actions will be taken by the instructor to create a positive learning environment?

Feelings are ever present in the classroom. Some feelings may be overtly expressed, some private, and others outside of awareness (Menges and Rando). Levels of student motivation vary, so it is important to build a sense of belonging or community immediately, before barriers between teacher and student are created (Povlacs, p. 8).

<u>Step Two: Creating a Positive Selling Environment (Opening)</u>

Creating a positive selling environment can be as complex as decorating an office or taking potential customers on a fishing trip, or as simple as telling a joke or commenting on the weather. The keys to spinning receptivity to your message are preparation, proper profiling of the customer (introvert, extrovert, passive, aggressive), a statement of purpose, and establishing an active relationship with the customer's best interests in mind (The Psychology of Sales Success). Building trust does not happen overnight, but by focusing of the four elements of trust --- competence, reliability, intentions and appearance --- the seeds of trust are planted (Peterson).

The positive environment then allows the relationship, or seed, to grow and develop. "Relationship selling transcends the sales transaction and looks beyond it to the ongoing relationship between the buyer and the seller." (Cathcart, p. xiii)

Whatever level of motivation that students bring to the classroom will be transformed, for better or worse, by what happens in that classroom. Interaction between teachers and learners, and interaction among learners, are powerful factors in promoting learning (Angelo). Active learning creates excitement in the classroom and needs to be incorporated into the daily routine of classroom instruction. Active learning gets students involved, relative to passive learning, and engages students (Bonwell). By placing a greater value on exploration of attitudes and values, and encouraging cooperative learning, information transmission is de-emphasized and greater emphasis is placed on developing student skills. Students can then be involved in higher order thinking.

One way to develop a positive learning environment is to allow students to co-create the course syllabus. Give students the opportunity to take responsibility for what they will learn in the course by allowing them input on the syllabus prior to the syllabus being distributed. Solicit input based on student's prior experience and interests. This does not mean that the students determine course content, but that they have some opportunity to influence that content, its presentation and prioritization (Ellis, p. 205). The syllabus can be much more than just a list; it can introduce the course to students in a number of creative ways, and can represent a vested covenant between student and teacher (UNL Teaching and Learning Center).

Step Three: Customer Needs Analysis

Once a receptive climate has been established, the customer-focused salesperson begins to determine customer needs. Needs analysis provides the foundation for future sales by identifying problems or concerns that the customer may have. The salesperson's desire to learn and willingness to listen builds additional good will and further develops the buyer-seller relationship. By concentrating on the buyer's needs, the salesperson demonstrates his/her desire to find solutions to the customer's needs, through which his/her own needs will be met.

The most direct, and quickest, method of determining needs is to simply --- ask. Student concerns regarding the course, course content, assessments, workload, and expectations can be in part gathered by soliciting their inputs on the course syllabus. A student questionnaire can also be used to determine student experience levels, (which is important for experiential learning) personal data such as e-mail addresses and phone numbers, and can provide the tool for ice-breaker and community development activities. This helps to reduce the competitive nature of education and enhance the cooperative (Ellis, 7th ed.).

Motivation plays an important role in learning (Schunk, p. 284). One way to encourage students to become self-motivated is to help them find personal meaning and value in the material. This cannot be done without first identifying their needs. Creating an atmosphere that is open and positive, and helping students feel they are a valued member of a learning community also enhances student's self-motivation (Davis).

Step Four: Problem Solving (Demonstration of Benefits)

Once communication barriers have been eliminated and customer needs have been identified, the salesperson can begin to offer solutions to the customer's needs. It is key that benefits derived from the offered solutions (most likely a product or service) be directly linked with product features and advantages. Do not assume that the customer can readily see the linkage between the product's features and the benefit of purchasing the product. The Features (what is it) – Advantages (what does it do) – Benefits (what's in it for me) or FAB approach to problem solving is a process that allows the buyer to reach their own conclusion as to how much the product will satisfy their stated needs. In consultative or relationship selling, the salesperson's role is not to "sell" the product, but to lead clients along the path to self-determination (Webster, p. 91).

Not all students are motivated by the same values, needs, wants, or desires. Prior knowledge and experience affects how the learner perceives and values new information (Svinicki). It is important to work from student's strength and interests. Explain how the content and objectives of the course will help the student achieve their educational, professional, and personal goals (Lucas).

Sometimes students resist taking a course. Sell students on the benefits they will receive from the course. Demonstrate points of transferability. Show that many of the techniques the student will learn directly relate to the techniques that they will need to build successful careers. Distinguish between "liking" the material and "benefiting" from the material. This is important in helping students recognize that not all content can be fun and exciting (Ellis).

<u>Step Five: Close</u>

The close is in a sense the moment of truth. An agreement on action (hopefully a sale) is reached and the climate for further interaction is established. At this point, plan, needs assessment, and problem solving converge. If needs were properly identified and met, the sale is made and both parties benefit mutually from the transaction. If not, additional data may be needed to identify opportunities to improve the relationship, the environment, needs assessment and/or the solutions offered.

For educators, the “close”, or “making the sale” involves something less tangible. There may be no physical exchange of product, but the exchange of knowledge. Indications of a successful “sale” can include student performance on assessments, grades and course evaluations. The opportunity for success in the classroom occurs on a daily basis, with each subject, topic, or concept that is introduced being either accepted or rejected, based upon how the concept was presented. Students that buy into what the instructor has to sell, illustrated in some part by learning, benefit. Those that do not may have failed to see the value of entering into the transaction.

Methodology

Teaching methods were varied between four Job Seeking Skills classes. In two of the classes (referred to as the “Ownership Group”), a receptive learning environment was created through a conscious effort to develop a level of student involvement in the course and the subject matter to be presented. As suggested by Ellis, students were given the opportunity to take responsibility for what they would learn in the course by being allowed input on the syllabus prior to the syllabus being distributed. Students were initially given an outline of the course content and were asked to suggest additions, deletions, and their opinions of assessments (exams, homework and projects) to be used. A complete syllabus was then distributed on the second day of class.

Expectations of both the instructor and students were discussed and agreed to. The syllabus was positioned as a contract between the instructor and the students. Student concerns, interest level, background, and goals for the course were determined through group discussion and written survey. Course objectives and content were explained in terms of helping students achieve their educational, professional, and personal goals (Lucas). This was accomplished using the Features, Advantages, and Benefits (FAB) approach. Overall, students were encouraged to develop a sense of empowered ownership of the course, where they viewed themselves as active participants. The development of learning communities and cooperation were emphasized.

The other two classes ("Control Group") were conducted in a less inclusive manner. The completed syllabus was presented to students and reviewed on the first day of class. Questions would be addressed, but the degree of transferability of in-class techniques to real world situations was minimized. The instructor was open and friendly, but made little effort to build a sense of belonging or ownership. While discussion and role-playing was used, cooperation outside of class and community were not stressed. The instructor was available during stated office hours for all four of the sections, but encouraged those students in the Ownership Group to work together whenever they had problems.

At the conclusion of the semester, course and instructor evaluations were conducted in each section. Student grades and section grade point averages for the course were calculated, and average attendance rates where derived.

Results

During the summer semester, 1998, four sections of Job Seeking Skills (JSS 1201) were taught at a mid-western community college. The same instructor, using the same syllabus, evaluation criteria, textbook, overheads and handouts taught each section. Each class contained between 16 and 29 students. All of the students were classified academically as freshmen or sophomores, and were enrolled in programs of study for which the course was required. Two of the classes met in the same classroom, while each of the other two sections met in different rooms. There was a wide distribution of student ages across each of the sections and the gender distribution was 51 percent female and 49 percent male. The sections met at 7:30, 8:30, 8:30, and 10:45 in the morning.

The one credit course prepared students to find and acquire the right job in a competitive job market. Topics included job inquiry, resume writing, job application letters, follow-up letters, job application forms and interviewing techniques. The objectives of the course were 1) to gain a better understanding of one's self and career goals, 2) to write powerful resumes and cover letters, and 3) to gain confidence in interviewing skills. Methods of instruction for all classes included lecture, discussion, role-play, and videotaped mock interviews.

Students that were given ownership of the course had a section grade point average of 3.25 (on a 4.0 scale) and average attendance rate of 86.44 percent for the semester (Table 1).

Those without ownership (Control Group) earned a 2.35 grade point average for the course and attended only 76.45 percent of the class periods. Two students that dropped the class but failed to officially withdrawal, therefore receiving an "F" for the course adversely affected the grade point average in the control group. Students in the ownership group earned 35.4 percent more A's and 10.2 percent fewer F's than the control group.

Student satisfaction levels and instructor performance were also evaluated. Students given ownership rated course Planning and Organization a 3.68 (4.0 maximum), compared to 3.26 for the second group. Instructor ratings were 3.82 and 3.70, respectively, for the ownership and control groups. Finally, the Assessment of Learning was valued at 3.61 for the ownership group and 3.59 for the control group.

Conclusions

Given the importance of agriculture to the global economy, and the increase in agribusiness teaching programs throughout the United States, it is vital that the teaching methods utilized in the classroom maximize student performance. When we "sell on purpose," great care is taken to create a receptive environment so that a mutually beneficial level of trust can be established. Products and services are positioned as solutions to problems and salespeople are viewed as important members of the team. When team members act for the overall good of the team, long-term relationships are built and encouraged to develop. Only when that has been accomplished will utility be maximized.

By adopting agribusiness sales techniques into the classroom environment, students play the role of buyers and instructors act as sellers. Students are invited to share in the dialog that is their course, as partners that can help to determine their ultimate destiny. Efforts are made by the instructor to adopt teaching styles that are appropriate for a variety of students learning styles and experiences. Students and teacher both understand the relationship that exists and are presented with the information necessary for both to achieve success. The active learning process provides the foundation for instructor / student interaction, which is an essential element to, needs determination and the eventual transfer of knowledge. As this research demonstrates, the exchange of knowledge then becomes a mutually beneficial transaction. Introducing agribusiness selling concepts into the classroom, by “teaching on purpose,” a win-win-win transaction occurs; students benefit, faculty benefits, and the agribusiness community and society benefit.

Table 1: Student and Instructor Performance

	Control Group "No Ownership"	Experimental Group "Ownership"
No. Students	39	49
Attendance (%)	76.45	86.44
Class GPA	2.35 / 4.0	3.25 / 4.0
% Receiving A	17.4	52.8
% Receiving B	34.8	27.8
% Receiving C	26.1	13.9
% Receiving D	8.7	2.8
% Receiving F	13.0	2.8
	Student Satisfaction Level	
Course Planning & Organization	3.26 / 4.0	3.68 / 4.0
Instructor Rating	3.7 / 4.0	3.82 / 4.0
Assessment of Learning	3.59 / 4.0	3.6 / 4.0

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