

# Consultant Learning®: A Model for Student Directed Learning in Business Education

## Introduction

This summary describes a teaching methodology called Consultant Learning, a new method of structuring courses in business disciplines in a way that empowers students and places them in control of their own learning process. Consultant Learning turns the classroom into a laboratory for the free enterprise system, using price as the allocation mechanism for grades earned. Students determine their own grades by earning “consulting fees” by completing projects. The amount of consulting fees earned determines each student’s grade.

The “Consultant Learning” approach is built upon a significantly different paradigm from the traditional college course. Traditional courses operate on a system in which all students are required to do the same *quantity* of work and the *quality* of the work performed is judged and graded. Accepting low quality work and simply lowering a student’s grade for poor quality is the predominant assessment paradigm used in universities. In Consultant Learning, the required *quality* of the work students perform is held constant at a very high level – “professionalism” – and low quality work must be redone and resubmitted until it meets that professionalism standard. Then the *quantity* of professional quality work students perform during the semester becomes the basis for their grades.

Since the 1960s, the terms “student empowerment” and “student-directed” or “self-directed learning” have made their way into the literature on teaching. Education scholars have concluded that the more students are “empowered,” that is, the more they are involved in the process of designing and directing their own learning experiences, the more they enjoy the learning process and the more they learn and retain. (See Ellsworth, 1989; Johnson, 1992; Lincoln, 1992; Newman & Smolen, 1993, to name a few). In one of the classic works on Self-Directed Learning, Knowles (1975, p. 14), stated that “People who take the initiative in learning . . . learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught.”

Consultant Learning places students in control of their own learning process. Consultant Learning turns the classroom into a laboratory for the free enterprise system, using price as the allocation mechanism for grades earned. Each student determines his/her own grade based on how many hours of in- and out-of-class work they want to devote to the course. For each project completed, the student earns consulting fees, and the total amount of consulting fees earned determines the grade the student receives.

## Theoretical Foundations

Consultant Learning has its foundations in several teaching and assessment approaches. In the late 1960s, Benjamin Bloom, et al., (1971) introduced an alternative teaching and assessment process for schools which they called “Learning for Mastery.” A major difference between Consultant Learning and traditional “Mastery Learning” is that the “Mastery Learning” model must be implemented across an entire curriculum – it can not be mixed with traditionally-graded courses in a standard curriculum. Consultant Learning can be utilized in a single course without completely changing the assessment and grading standards of an entire institution.

More recently, a teaching method called “Problem-Based Learning” has been introduced (Bridges, 1992) which motivates student learning by placing all learning objectives into “problems” or “projects” which students are challenged to solve, the solution of which requires students to teach themselves the material and accomplish the educational objectives of the course.

Consultant Learning builds upon “student-centered, problem-based learning” by giving students even more autonomy to decide how they will design and complete their projects, in collaboration with the instructor. “Problem, theme or topic-based learning can be a strategy in most teaching modalities but fits exceptionally well in multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning and teaching styles” (Glasgow, 1997). Consultant Learning then combines this student-centered, problem-based approach with a novel assessment technique that can be used in a single class without requiring complete revamping of the entire curriculum for implementation.

### **The Consultant Learning Approach**

In Consultant Learning, students learn by undertaking and completing various “consulting projects.” More specifically, each student is paid a consulting fee of \$200.00 per hour for their “consulting time.” At the beginning of the course, they select/design their own consulting projects. If an instructor has certain projects which s/he feels are so important vis-a-vis the course objectives that every student should undertake these projects, they can be made mandatory for all students. In general, however, the fewer the number of mandatory projects assigned, the higher the level of student motivation. It is also usually wise to provide an extensive list (or “menu”) of possible project options from which less creative and/or less venturesome students may select. At the same time, the instructor should provide a mechanism by which students may design their own projects. [See Exhibit 1 for Lists of the project options offered in my Family Business and Small Business courses.]

Before a student can do any project, s/he must submit a proposal to the instructor and have it approved by the instructor. In this way, the instructor maintains control of the educational process, while giving each student the maximum flexibility to select and/or design projects that are interesting and valuable for that student. In general, students both desire and require flexibility in project selection and/or design if they are going to use their creativity to become intimately involved in their own

education. However, for most undergraduate students to feel safe enough to be creative, they need tremendous structure, otherwise they may panic because they do not understand how to be successful in the course. The proposal system maintains great flexibility within a well defined structure. Students are requested to submit their proposals by e-mail. This allows the instructor to respond to them within 24 hours or less, a process that typically uses only a few minutes a day of instructor time.

As students complete projects, they put their projects into a portfolio. At the end of the course, these portfolios are submitted to the instructor for assigning grades. After being assigned the earned grade, all portfolios are returned to the students, who are encouraged to use them in their job searches as a way of gaining competitive advantage in the job market. Chappell and Schermerhorn (1999, p. 652) explain the value of students creating portfolios of their work “to demonstrate career readiness.”

Initially, “pricing” projects is a challenge for many students. A useful guideline is to point out that there are three things that should generally be consistent with one another on properly priced projects. These are: (1) the number of “consulting hours” allocated to the project, (2) the number of pages of written project output, and (3) the fee paid for the project. My experience is that the average student spends about 2½ hours of work per page of professional quality written output. That means that the price for a normal 4 page report (including reasonable library research plus a bibliography that should include 3 to 4 sources) would be \$2,000.00 (2½ hours per page times 4 pages equals 10 hours at \$200.00 per hour). However, students are always free to negotiate the fee with the instructor if they feel that one of their projects doesn’t fit the normal relationship of research time to output. In addition, if a student decides to change a project after they have begun work on it, they can come to the instructor to negotiate a change. “Consulting hours” is also a proxy for the difficulty of the project. Thus, the more difficult a project is, the more “consulting hours” the instructor should accept for it, and, as a result, the higher the fees for completing that project.

Students can also earn fees for in-class work, such as class attendance. Moreover, the instructor can structure the “pricing” of attendance on an increasing scale, so that a student loses more for each additional absence. Such a graduated pricing structure rewards students for missing as few class sessions as possible. Students can also be encouraged to read the assigned readings, and to prepare for class by the use of a “call-on-me” list. In this context, students are paid a fee for each class in which they sign the “call-on-me” list as they enter the classroom. Signing the “call-on-me” list says the student is prepared on that day’s materials and is ready to take part in class discussion. Missing class or not signing the “call-on-me” list has no penalty.

It simply means that the student must do more projects outside of class in order to earn enough dollars to attain the grade they desire. [See Exhibit 2 for the Prices/Revenues that students can earn for Class Attendance, Call-on-Me Lists, and Early Project Submission Bonuses, and Exhibit 3 for the Total Revenues required to earn different Final Course Grades in my Family Business and Small Business classes.]

During class time, a mixture of educational methods is used, including lecture-discussions of the concepts and materials in the textbook and supplemental readings, discussions of video cases and movie clips, and the use of guest speakers, class exercises, and computer simulations. The kinds of projects that are included in the “menu” of items from which the students can select will vary from course to course.

In summary, in Consultant Learning, students determine both the kinds of projects they will undertake and how many projects of each kind they will do. Each project pays the student consulting fees. The total amount in a student’s “Consulting Fees Earned” account at the end of the semester determines the grade that s/he will receive for the course.

### **The Consulting Project Approval and Evaluation Process**

To approve a proposal, the instructor should put either an electronic or regular signature on the project proposal, and return it to the student. The student then attaches this “signed” proposal contract to the finished project when the latter is submitted, so that the instructor can judge the project output within the context of the proposal contract. Once the proposal is approved, the student undertakes work on the project. If the student runs into difficulty along the way, they are expected to utilize the other resources of the university, such as the writing center, the media center, the reference desk at the library, etc. in order to successfully complete the project, or to see the instructor for help or about changing the initial contract if the project proves to be significantly more difficult than expected.

When the student has completed a project, they submit their project report along with the original signed proposal contract. If the project report is judged to be NOT of professional quality, it is returned unsigned with a “resubmit” instruction written on it, together with a set of comments on how it can be made into a report of professional quality. When a student submits a rewrite, all previous drafts must be turned in along with the current draft; that way the instructor has access to all the notes given to the student on prior drafts which enables the instructor to see if the student has done what they were asked to do. When the project is judged to be of “professional quality,” the instructor writes “PAID \$2,000.00” (or whatever amount was agreed upon in the original proposal) on the top of the report’s cover sheet, signs it, and returns it to the student.

## Final Grading

Near the end of the class, students submit their completed portfolios to the instructor for “payment.” The first two pages in the portfolio are accounting sheets that list everything for which the student should be paid, including class attendance, “call-on-me” sign-ups, and projects completed. At the bottom of the last accounting sheet is a place for the student to put the total dollars that they have earned, and the grade that they should receive. Note that there are no disagreements on grades, since students acknowledge exactly what grade the fees that they have earned entitle them to. [See Exhibits 4 - 6 for projects done by students earning As, Bs, and Cs in my Family Business course.]

### Some Benefits and Drawbacks to Consultant Learning

**Skills Mastered.** The major skills that students master using Consultant Learning include learning how to define a question in researchable terms, identifying information sources, collecting information, organizing that information into a readable report, and writing a report that will be useful to others. Students learn these skills by doing them with guidance from the instructor, including discussions in class about how to find information on topics, comments written on their projects indicating what needs to be done to improve them, and coaching during office hours for those who need special help.

**Rewriting.** Students learn more about writing when they have to rewrite and resubmit poorly written material than they do by getting it back with a low grade, even with comments. With Consultant Learning, the student is required to evaluate the instructor’s comments and use that feedback to rewrite the project until it is professional.

**Course Design Flexibility.** Consultant Learning is extremely flexible. The instructor can designate certain projects or assignments as mandatory. Rather than requiring an assignment, however, my experience indicates that a better way is to “price” the assignment so as to make it so attractive that few students will choose to pass it up. This places the maximum control in the student’s hands, and empowered individuals tend to throw themselves into things that they have chosen to do more than people who are being dictated to. Each semester, I look over the list of suggested assignments in the syllabus and adjust the recommended consulting fees on those assignments I want to encourage.

**Grading Workload.** A possible negative to the Consultant Learning approach is the instructor workload. With students doing several to many projects each, and many of those projects being submitted in written form, it is easy for the instructor to become overwhelmed with “grading” (paper evaluation) particularly in schools where class sizes are large. It is important for the instructor to remember that it is not his/her obligation to edit every page of a poorly written paper. In addition, since the instructor is not putting a low grade on poor projects, he/she doesn’t need to “justify the grade” by writing lots of comments on the paper. I simply circle enough errors to show the

student the need for proper editing (I edit at the most one or two pages), and then insist that the student get help editing the rest of their paper from the Writing Center on our campus, from fellow students, or from a tutor if needed. Total grading workload for a Consultant Learning course is comparable with a course using essay or short-answer examinations as the evaluation medium.

**Grade Inflation.** One “negative” that some of my colleagues complain about is that students in my courses earn an inordinate number of “A”s. This is “grade inflation” some claim. I respond by saying that grade inflation is giving “A” grades to “B” work. If this methodology motivates a larger percentage of students to actually perform “A” quality work, that is not “grade inflation.”

### **Student Reactions to Consultant Learning**

My students rave about Consultant Learning! In student evaluations, the courses I teach using this approach invariably are rated with the highest ratings under our rating system. Students’ comments on the unstructured questions are even more telling.

In answer to the question “What did you like best about this course?” more than 75% of the students in every class make specific written comments that they loved Consultant Learning. Typical answers include: “I love being able to decide what I want to do my projects on;” “I get to decide what is most important to me and spend my time on those things;” “I get to set my own schedule and my own deadlines.”

In answer to the question “What did you like least about this course?,” many students make comments like: “Nothing -- keep it just as it is.” When they do have negative comments to make, the comments usually concern the students’ ability to procrastinate, such as: “I didn’t like that there were no deadlines – it was too easy to procrastinate.”

### **The Range of Applicability of the Consultant Learning Approach**

I have used Consultant Learning in several different upper-division undergraduate and MBA entrepreneurship and management courses, including Family Business and Small Business Management, as well as Strategic Management and Policy, Organization Behavior, Organization Theory, and Entrepreneurship.

### **Summary**

This paper describes Consultant Learning, a new method of structuring courses in business in a way that empowers students and places them in control of their own learning process. Consultant Learning turns the classroom into a laboratory for the free enterprise system, using price as the allocation mechanism for grades earned. Consultant Learning uses a significantly different paradigm from traditional courses, holding the quality of work students do constant at a very high level and grading on the basis of the quantity of excellent quality work performed by each student. Quantity of

excellent quality work performed becomes the grading dimension while students are taught that mediocre quality is NEVER acceptable. Consultant Learning offers a viable and valuable alternative to traditional pedagogy while offering a flexible and interesting new paradigm for entrepreneurship, management, and most of business education.

## Exhibit 1

### List of Projects from which Students May Select for the Family Business and Small Business Courses

#### Family Business “Menu” of Projects:

| <u>Fees Allowed</u> |   |
|---------------------|---|
| 1.                  | Family Business History (Highly Recommended)..... \$3,000   |
| 2.                  | Business Family Genogram (Highly Recommended) ..... \$2,000   |
| 3.                  | Resume and Cover Letter Project (Highly Recommended)..... \$1,000   |
| 4.                  | Interview the Owner of a Family Business (other than yours)<br>regarding succession planning in the business ..... \$2,000-\$3,000  |
| 5.                  | Interview a Junior Generation Member of a Family Business<br>(other than yours) regarding succession planning in the business .. \$2,000-\$3,000                                      |
| 6.                  | Book Reports..... \$1,000-\$2,500   |
| 7.                  | Case Summaries ..... \$400-\$1,000  |
| 8.                  | Current Events Analyses ..... \$400-\$800   |
| 9.                  | Presentation Speeches (i.e., to simulate giving or receiving an award)... \$500-\$1,000   |
| 10.                 | Attend a Family Business Forum Meeting and Write a Report on It ..... \$2,000   |
| 11.                 | Student Designed Projects (Some Examples)..... Up to \$5,000  |
| (a)                 | The initiation of succession planning in their families;  |
| (b)                 | Interviews with both parents and grandparents;  |
| (c)                 | A team project on trusts as an estate planning tool;  |
| (d)                 | A report on the impact that the changes in the estate tax will have<br>on family businesses by first researching the law changes and then<br>interviewing two Family Business owners. |

#### Small Business Management “Menu” of Projects:

| <u>Fees Allowed</u> |  |
|---------------------|--|
| 1.                  | The Business Disc Computer Simulation (Required Assignment) ..... \$4,000  |
| 2.                  | Resume and Cover Letter Project (Highly Recommended)..... \$1000   |
| 3.                  | A Major Team Small Business Analysis (a group of related projects)Up to \$10,000   |
| 4.                  | Interview an Owner of a Small Business ..... \$2,000-\$3,000   |
| 5.                  | Book Reports..... \$1,000-\$2,500  |
| 6.                  | Case Summaries ..... \$400-\$1,000   |
| 7.                  | Current Events Analyses ..... \$400-\$800  |
| 8.                  | Presentation Speeches (to simulate Giving or Receiving an Award).. \$500-\$1,000   |
| 9.                  | Reaction to a Guest  |
| 9.                  | Student Designed Projects (Some Examples)..... Up to \$5,000   |
| (a)                 | A proposal to a rock ‘n’ roll band to be their manager;  |
| (b)                 | A proposal to a band to start a fan club business for them<br>(The student was subsequently hired to set up such a business.); |
| (c)                 | A feasibility study on teaching surfing in a wave pool;  |

- (d) An evaluation of five franchises  
(The student actually bought one of these franchises).

## Exhibit 2

### Prices/Revenues for Class Attendance, Call-on-Me Listings, and Early Submissions in my Family and Small Business “Consultant Learning” Classes

Class Attendance Fees are paid on the descending scale shown below, based on 27 classes in a semester. (See page 19 in the Small Business Syllabus):

| <b>In-Class Consulting Fees Earned for Attendance</b> |             |                  |                     |
|---|-------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Classes Attended                                      | Fees Earned | Classes Attended | Fees Earned         |
| 27  | \$ 5,000    | 22               | 2,000               |
| 26  | 4,900       | 21               | 0                   |
| 25  | 4,700       | 20               | (2,000)             |
| 24  | 4,300       | 19               | (4,000)             |
| 23  | 3,500       | <19              | (2,000) per Absence |

Signing the **Call-on-Me List**, which means that the student has read the assigned materials for the day and is prepared to discuss those materials in class, pays \$200, e.g., 22 sessions equals \$4,400.

**Early Submission Bonuses** are paid when a project is submitted prior to the week the project is due. Bonuses increase by 5% for each week early that the project is submitted, i.e., a project submitted one week early earns a 5% bonus, 2 weeks early a 10% bonus, etc.

## Exhibit 3

### The Total Revenues Needed to Earn Different Final Course Grades

Listed below are the Total Revenues required to earn specific grades in my Family and Small Business classes. (See page 27 of my Small Business Syllabus):

| <b>Assigning Final Grades</b> |       |                      |       |
|-------------------------------|-------|----------------------|-------|
| Fees Earned                   | Grade | Fees Earned          | Grade |
| \$30,000 & Up                 | A+    | \$17,000 to \$18,999 | B-    |
| \$25,000 to \$29,999          | A     | \$15,000 to \$16,999 | C+    |
| \$23,000 to \$24,999          | A-    | \$13,000 to \$14,999 | C     |
| \$21,000 to \$22,999          | B+    | \$11,000 to 12,999   | C-    |

|                      |   |                |   |
|----------------------|---|----------------|---|
| \$19,000 to \$20,999 | B | Below \$11,000 | F |
|----------------------|---|----------------|---|

#### Exhibit 4

| <b>Typical Projects Submitted by a Student Earning an A in Family Business</b>  |                |
|---|----------------|
| Attendance: 25 - (Attended 25 of the 27 sessions, 2 Absences)   | \$4,700        |
| Call-on-Me Lists signed: 24 (means the student has read the assignment and was prepared to discuss the readings for 24 of the 25 class sessions s/he attended). | \$4,800        |
| Genogram (Family Business Tool (similar to a Family Tree, but expanded) (Highly Recommended project) Submitted when due – No Bonus                              | \$2,000        |
| Family Business History (Highly Recommended project) Submitted when due – No Bonus  | \$3,000        |
| Attend USD Family Business Forum session & wrote report on it (4 pages) Submitted when due – No Bonus   | \$2,000        |
| Interview with a Family Business owner (4 page report) Submitted 8 weeks early – 40% Bonus  | \$2,000<br>800 |
| Book report on <i>Family Business, Risky Business</i> Submitted 5 weeks early – 25% Bonus   | \$2,000<br>500 |
| Report on Use of Trusts in Estate Planning (6 page report) Submitted 3 weeks early – 15% Bonus  | \$3,000<br>450 |
| Resume and Cover Letter project Submitted 2 weeks early – 10% Bonus   | \$1,000<br>100 |
| Total Fees Earned for Semester (\$25,000 to \$29,999 earns an A)  | \$26,350       |

### Exhibit 5

| <b>Typical Projects Submitted by a Student Earning a B in Family Business</b>   |                |
|---|----------------|
| Attendance: 23 - (Attended 23 of the 27 sessions, 4 Absences)   | \$3,500        |
| Call-on-Me Lists signed: 20 (means the student has read the assignment and was prepared to discuss the readings for the class 20 of the 23 class sessions s/he attended). | \$4,000        |
| Genogram<br>Submitted when due – No Bonus   | \$2,000        |
| Family Business History<br>Submitted when due – No Bonus  | \$3,000        |
| Interview with the Owner of a Family Business (4 page report)<br>Submitted 7 weeks early – 35% Bonus  | \$2,000<br>700 |
| Analysis of two Family Business Cases (3 page analysis of each – \$1,000 each)<br>Both cases submitted 4 weeks early – 20% Bonus  | \$2,000<br>400 |
| Resume and Cover Letter project (Highly Recommended)<br>Submitted 3 weeks early – 15% Bonus   | \$1,000<br>150 |
| Written Report on Current Event in <i>Wall Street Journal</i><br>Submitted 1 week early – 5% Bonus  | \$500<br>25    |
| Total Fees Earned for Semester (\$19,000-\$20,999 earns a B)  | \$19,275       |

### Exhibit 6

| <b>Typical Projects Submitted by a Student Earning an C in Family Business</b>   |                |
|--|----------------|
| Attendance: 22 - (Attended 22 of the 27 sessions, 5 Absences)  | \$2,000        |
| Call-on-Me Lists signed: 18 (means the student has read the assignment and was prepared to discuss the readings for 18 of the 22 classes s/he attended). | \$3,600        |
| Genogram Family Business Tool (similar to a Family Tree but expanded)<br>(Highly Recommended project) Submitted when due – No Bonus                      | \$2,000        |
| Family Business History (Highly Recommended project)<br>Submitted 2 weeks early – 10% Bonus  | \$3,000<br>300 |
| Resume and Cover Letter project<br>Submitted 2 weeks early – 10% Bonus   | \$1,000<br>100 |
| Analysis of a Family Business Case (3 page analysis)<br>Submitted 1 week early – 5% Bonus  | \$1,000<br>50  |

| <b>Typical Projects Submitted by a Student Earning an C in Family Business</b> |          |
|--|----------|
| Attendance: 22 - (Attended 22 of the 27 sessions, 5 Absences)                  | \$2,000  |
| Total Fees Earned for Semester (\$13,000-\$14,999 earns a C)                   | \$13,050 |

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**“Consultant Learning:  
A Model for Student Directed Learning in Entrepreneurship Education”**

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The "Consultant Learning" approach is built upon a significantly different paradigm from the traditional college course. Traditional courses operate on a system in which all students are required to do the same *quantity* of work and the *quality* of the work performed is judged and graded. Accepting low quality work and simply lowering a student’s grade for poor quality is the predominant grading paradigm on university campuses. In the "Consultant Learning" approach, by contrast, the required *quality* of the work students must perform is held constant at a very high level – “professionalism” – and low quality work must be redone and resubmitted until it meets that professionalism standard. Then the *quantity* of professional quality work each student performs during the semester becomes the basis for his/her grade.

Students earn consulting fees for projects which they select from a menu of project choices or which they design themselves on topics that are of interest to them. For each project that a student intends to complete he/she must submit a proposal to the professor. The professor maintains control of the process by approving all proposals before the project can be undertaken by the student.

Once the proposal is approved the student may complete the project and submit it. Projects which are not of professional quality are returned to the student with notes on what needs to be done to make the project professional quality. The student must rework and resubmit the project in order to get “paid” for it. Once a project is professional quality, it is returned it to the student with “Paid \$2,000” (or whatever amount was agreed upon in the proposal) written on its cover.

Students also receive consulting fees for in-class work, such as attendance and being prepared for class. Near the end of the semester each student compiles all his/her paid projects into a portfolio that is submitted to the professor. In the portfolio are two accounting sheets showing what the student has earned from in-class fees and from project fees, and what grade that amount of fees qualifies the student for. There is never an argument over the grade since the student determines his/her own grade and justifies that grade with the contents of his/her portfolio.

An article on the “Consultant Learning” approach was published in the April 2002 edition of the Journal of Management Education (Vol. 26, No. 2). Extensive materials have been developed to guide students through the process, including a course Syllabus for each course, a Suggested Projects booklet for each course, a Student Guide to Consultant Learning, and a Style Guide for Professional Quality Business Writing. All the materials, including the JME article and complete instructions on how to implement the method, are available on my website at [www.sandiego.edu/~kunkel/syllabi](http://www.sandiego.edu/~kunkel/syllabi).