

FBL Study Skills Showcase - 27 October 2022 -

Part 2: Business study skills

ROB MOORE: And welcome back. So those of you who were in the previous session with us or have watched the previous recording, we are now moving on from law to talk about some of the business skills. And today, I am joined by Allan and Claire. They are both student experience managers in the business school.

Allan's been with The Open University as a lecturer since 2010. And he likes to run ultramarathons, and you can often see him running around the parks in Scotland. Whether that's a warning or an encouragement, I don't know.

Claire has got a PhD in organisational behaviour. And actually, she founded a community first responder scheme in her local area. She's moved house, and now she's setting up another one. So a bit of background too, I guess.

And they're going to talk to us today about study skills and approaches that are going to help you to achieve as you write your assignments. So before I jump over to Allan and Claire, Marc, can you tell us have we got any questions that have cropped up over the short break or anything that the students have put in the chat for us?

MARC SHUCKSMITH-WESLEY: Yeah, so one thing I really wanted to address in relation to the last half actually, was what is mooting. And it's one of those words I just took as a given that people would have heard of this-- heard of this thought. So I wanted to spend just a few moments just addressing that. So mooting is essentially-- it's fake court. You present one side or the other of a legal debate. And you usually have a co-counsel, and you create this argument. And you go up, and you get in-- often, inside a mock courtroom.

And you argue in front of a judge. I remember myself, I sat in front of-- I sat in front of judges and barristers and so on. And then the judge picks you apart. So it's quite stressful. And it's quite a-- yeah, it's quite a tense thing to be engaged with. One of my friends-- and I don't want to put you off from doing this because it's an amazing experience-- but one of my friends actually had a nosebleed just before he presented once, which I think kind of gave an indication as to how much pressure is on there.

ROB MOORE: Oh, excellent. It does sound a little bit like our house when we're deciding who's making a cup of tea in the morning. So we've now got some more multiple choice questions. We have actually, a word cloud for you to take part in this time. So the word cloud is give us one word that tells us about critical thinking. And you can write the one word multiple times. You can write different words. But what jumps to mind when you think about critical thinking? And then tell us how confident you feel about your business skills. Give it a mark out of 10.

And then the ticker question that's going across the bottom, we're asking you to identify something that you consider to be a key business skill. I'm going to move on to my first guest, Allan. So, Allan, you're going to tell us all about critical thinking. Now, I'm really good at criticising people. So is that what critical thinking is, and is that what I'm supposed to be doing in the business school?

ALLAN MOONEY: Maybe a bit, but let me explain. So as a key business skill and being critical, being critical is different from being-- as just criticising. So it's evaluating. It's being critical of the information that's been presented. But it's also, more importantly, being used to influence and enable decision

making. See, if I take it back a bit and think about life in general, it's a key life skill, being critical. You're making sound judgments from running a house, through your employment choices.

My kitchen renovation project, which was explained to me last week that I have to embark on, is a really good example. Where we've had to sit down, I've had to look at the resource planning in terms of where will we get them. We've got to look at where are the skills to enable that to take place. And the critical part of it, can I question that decision that has been made to embark on that project, given it was not made by me, but it was made by sound judgement from my wife. And I wouldn't criticise that in any way.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely, yes. Well, you could question it. You wouldn't do it twice. So, it sounds like critical thinking is essential when it comes to the assignment. So how do we deal with our level-one students when they come in with regard to critical thinking? Do we expect them to come in and be perfect at this on their very first journey out on B-100, for example?

ALLAN MOONEY: No, and that's a really good point in terms of the different levels of critical thinking. So on a level-one module, your level of critical thinking will not be as in-depth as say, for example, a level-three module. But what's important in that level-one module is you start on that journey of questioning and exploring whether there are other views that could support the information that's been presented.

And I often explain it to level-one students, and also level-three students, that it's a bit like being a child again. Do you remember either being around small kids that whatever you said they said, but why, but why. And as we get older, that but why starts to be discouraged. It just is, is what we're told as we get older, it just is. But I would encourage as a level-one student to just start that questioning again. But why? But why?

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. It's just not accepting things that are written on face value. Why did they say that? Why did they say it in that way? Why did they use those particular words? Why did they leave these things out? So yeah, absolutely, the why question is fantastic. And some of the students are picking this up as well. They're talking about critical thinking being objectivity or the why question. So Nixon put down the why question, which is great. Curiosity, absolutely. It's like being a tutor. One of the best skills we've got is we're dead nosy. We really want to find out what students are thinking and particularly, when we're looking at their own organisations.

So how do you bring critical thinking into an assignment? How do you include it in your writing, Allan? How do you recognise it?

ALLAN MOONEY: Well, I'm going to answer it in two parts, Rob. So the first part is I'm going to enter just a sort of framework. And the second part, I'm just going to give you a real practical way that you can introduce it in your assignment. So the first bit, there is a framework that some students may have already been introduced to-- the PROMPT framework.

So PROMPT is where whatever piece of information you're looking at, the P stands for presentation. And that's considered in things like is the presentation clear? Is it appropriate? Is it succinct? The R stands for relevance in terms of the relevance to the topic, to the level, and to the context. And in both of those areas, your questioning the presentation, you're questioning the relevance.

The O stands for objectivity, and you mentioned some of the students have highlighted this already. The objectivity is considering things like, does any bias exist, is there emotive language being used, is there a hidden agenda by the person who's presenting that information. Or the number of authors that have written the particular piece of information, are they one-sided? And what you're trying to do is challenge

the thought process. Don't read it in a way that you're accepting it. Approach it from a questioning perspective.

The M stands for methods. Are the methods clear? Was the sample that was used to determine the theory or the concept, is it outlined? Do for a fact how that method has been put in place? The P stands for provenance, which when I first came across provenance, I had to Google it because I wasn't sure what it meant. So provenance, is it cleared who produced it? Whose opinions? And this is important bit, do you trust the source?

And the example that students sometimes refer to when they're including references, there can be a tendency to use sources such as Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a really good source for general information. However, if you use PROMPT with Wikipedia, the objectivity and the relevance and the presentation could be questioned because it's user-- there is the ability for users to go in and make edits. So in essence, it's not an absolute definitive answer for a lot of things.

So that's presentation, relevance, objectivity, methods, provenance. And the last one, which links into what I'll touch on with a practical example, is timeliness. So it's thinking about when was it introduced? Is it current? Is it up to date, and has the situation changed?

So, Rob, you asked me about how to introduce this in assignment. As students are embarking on assignments, you will come across some theories. In business, there is a particular theory that springs to mind-- the Force Field Analysis, which many students here today would be familiar with. So the Force Field Analysis was produced by a theorist called Kurt Lewin in 1951.

That was a long time ago. Does it still have provenance? Is it timeless? Does it meet the criteria? It's still used in a number of business courses today because it does for-- it does-- addresses what the forces for change, the forces against change, and then explore some of those areas. But you could question its validity. So you're introducing a bit of critical questioning, i.e. is it still relevant in today's society?

Organisations have changed. There's different tools to assess the industry. Has that theory been adapted since 1951?

And the second theory I'll mention, which is very, very relevant to today's world, post-pandemic, is Handy's 1984, *The Future of Work*. *The Future of Work* was written before the internet, 1984, before the pandemic. Working practices have changed significantly. So if that is used as a theory, one of the questions-- if I was a student, I would be saying, is Charles Handy's thoughts on this entirely relevant? Has it been adapted as a result of these pretty significant changes? And I know that's quite a long answer, Rob.

ROB MOORE: No, no, we like a good, comprehensive answer. But I think the key thing that you're saying there is you're not saying that because a theory's old it's not relevant. It's you question the relevance, and you judge whether the theory, or whether the whole of the theory is appropriate. Because sometimes, elements of it, absolutely. But some elements, maybe not. So thank you for that on critical thinking. That was brilliant.

Megan has just put on the chat that she used the Why Process in a project she was running, and that really helped. And we're going to have a very quick look, Marc, at some of the answers to the questions and what's going on in the chat before we move on to Claire.

MARC SHUCKSMITH-WESLEY: So we did have Ashley Harrison say, can we actually pop in the text what PROMPT stands for? And thankfully, one of our colleagues was lurking around in there, Daniel

Russell, and indicated how it stands for presentation, relevance, objectivity, method, provenance, and timeliness. So that's just reiterating what Allan was saying.

And obviously, you can see here some of what the critical thinking feelings were. So you had people that feel difficult and worried about this, that it's an important concept, that they're concerned with how to engage with it and confused. Key words in relation to it-- one word that personifies, I suppose, critical thinking-- evaluation, analyse, succinct, communication, and questioning. And we've got Kyle mentions objectivity, which obviously it links back to PROMPT.

And then, just to look at how people feel over their confidence in relation to their business skills. So most of them are around the middle point, which that's the general bell curve, which we'd sort of expect to see.

There's a few up there who have got 10. So that's an interesting one. If you're that confident in your business skills, then you should be pretty successful. But most people, around that middle point.

And a few key business skills here we've got. So we've got analysing, ability to engage with data, marketing, which I'm assuming is a good one. I want to put my hands up and say, I'm not a business expert. My delving into business has been as a shopper. That's pretty much my only engagement with business. Bookkeeping, I would be terrible at that one. So if you're good at that one, hats off to you. And curiosity, I suppose that's probably really important, isn't it-- that kind of mind that wants to discover what the next important and big thing will be. So yeah, there we go, quite a lot to engage with there.

ROB MOORE: Excellent. So curiosity is better than my word, nosiness. But absolutely--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

So thank you for that, Marc. So, Claire, we're going to come to you now, and I believe you're going to tell us about some of the key academic skills that students need to develop and work on. So what are the skills that you want to see more of as a tutor?

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: Well, I think, Rob, even just following on from-- a little bit from what Allan was saying about critical thinking. That is really one of the key ones that we like to see. And it's where a lot of the marks tend to be allocated when it comes to actually marking assignments and so on. So just very briefly touching on it again, the idea that it's a fundamental life skill. And when you put up the little diagram there that had words on it that people had suggested, they were actually mostly negative. And almost people seem afraid of this idea of critical thinking.

But the thing to remember-- exactly, that's the diagram. The thing to remember is that it's something we do every day in our lives naturally. And we don't actually even realise we're doing it. Deciding which brand of shampoo will I buy, there's a process of critical thinking that goes on. But we do it subconsciously.

And it was quite funny when I was driving my son to school this morning in the car, we were listening to the radio, and there was an ad on for Zurich Insurance. And it went through-- for Zurich pensions-- and it went through all the reasons why Zurich pensions were good. And the ad-- the tagline was, "and that's why you should have a pension with Zurich." And my son, who's 11, piped up from the back seat saying, and that's why you should check out all their competitors to see what everybody else is doing. And I thought, oh, my work here is done. Critical thinking, I can set him free on the world. He's now well able. But it's simply that idea that you don't accept what you're told at face value. Allan went through a particular model that you could use. But even just more basically, it's the idea of being sceptical, not trusting what you're told automatically.

So another skill that's also very important in terms of studying business is the idea that you can apply theory to practice and also look at practice and see what theories might be relevant. So for example,

looking at your workplace, if you're in a workplace, and seeing, OK, well the theories that I'm learning about in my module, how would they apply there? Could I come up with new ideas for a new approach to some problem that we're experiencing by looking at the theories that are in my module?

I think even at the moment in particular-- I teach mainly on a module to do with leadership. And not to get political, but looking at the British government, it's like the module coming to life before our eyes. We're specifically looking at things like precarity and people living in precarious situations, not being able to influence their own futures and cost of living and all that kind of thing. And looking at also in government, and how maybe, people should be adopting some more charismatic leadership. And it's just-- it's fascinating if you can look at things in the world around you and see how they relate to the theory that's in your module.

ROB MOORE: And I think it's really-- one of the things I like about the business courses is the practical case studies that we use because it gives-- we don't make up the case studies generally. We take actual news stories. We take newspaper articles. And we ask the students to interpret real-life stories using the theories. So it's definitely a skill we develop as we go through from the first level-one course up to the level-three courses.

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: For sure.

ROB MOORE: Carry on with that one. Sorry.

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I was actually just going to say, when you say that we use real-life case studies, absolutely. We don't need to make them up. The world is bonkers enough that you can find a case study for any theory you might want. So there's no need to go making them up. So yes, we looked at their critical thinking a little bit and the idea of looking at the interface between theory and practice. Something else that's a key skill for a business student is academic writing and knowing how to write in an academic fashion. Now, of course, that links in again to the critical theory and thinking critically and writing critically. But when it comes to writing your assignments, there are certain conventions that you follow in terms of writing academically and writing properly. Main things that you can imagine are writing coherently, a nice fluid piece of writing with a beginning, a middle, an end, or whatever it is specifically that you're asked for in the question.

But what you really want to make sure is that the message that the reader of what you have written receives is the message that you intended them to receive. So you want to make sure that you are able to communicate accurately and fluidly. Also something to remember in academic writing is the idea of good academic practice and not plagiarising something. And this is something that I think worries students a lot. And even though we talk an awful lot about it in the OU, it's a perennial problem. And I think the reason it's a perennial problem is that students don't realise what exactly they have to do and how to avoid it.

Essentially, what it means is if you are using somebody else's ideas or you've read something somewhere, you need to make sure that that person is recognised for having that original idea. So if you are using somebody else's ideas, somebody else's materials, et cetera, you need to reference those. So it needs to be mentioned within the text, and then you have your full reference at the end. But that says that this wasn't originally my idea. I might be developing it and adding to it, but it was originally somebody else's.

Another point that I think we've--

ROB MOORE: I think we've got the--

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: Sorry, Rob, go first.

ROB MOORE: I was just going to say, we've got the widgets ready. So the students have been talking about the skills they think are essential. So we'll start with skills for University. So what are the key skills that students feel are important for University. And academic writing-- so 50%, self discipline, 27% critical thinking. So yeah, the discipline, the critical thinking, I wouldn't disagree with that. I think that's a good view. And communication is quite low.

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: I'm wondering looking at that, do they did they not realise what "Comms" really was referring to. When I was saying communications there, what I simply meant was the ability to communicate well, whether it's individually-- perhaps doing a presentation-- or a lot of the time when there's group work involved in study, communicating with each other, communicating effectively so that everybody knows what they're supposed to be doing, and everybody understands their role and is able to-- and feels comfortable communicating with each other to get a job done.

So to be honest, I think if people recognised that's what it was about, I think it would probably be a bit higher because I don't think you could get through University without effective communication. But looking at the self-discipline--

ROB MOORE: Maybe we should have ranked them rather than saying which was the most important.

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: Perhaps.

ROB MOORE: And then we looked at the transferable skills. So we're looking at which of those skills would be useful moving into business. So again, we've got the ability to apply theory to practice comes out well on top. And critical thinking's there. So I think the message on critical thinking is definitely getting through, and we're starting to see those key points coming through.

So in terms of the academic writing-- so we talked about the referencing-- and a question I'm always asked about is writing in the third person. How important is that when we come to writing the assignments, Claire? Is that a key thing we expect, or how would you-- what would you advise students to do on that?

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: Yeah, to be honest, it depends on what you're asked to do in any given assignment. For example, if it is a reflective piece of writing, you will often use the first person-- I found, I did, et cetera. Nonetheless, even in reflective writing-- and people sometimes get caught up on this-- it still needs to be academically rigorous. Yes, you're using terms that are more informal, but the academic rigour still has to be there.

It certainly would be convention that in general, if you're not doing something like a reflective piece, that yes, you would write in the third person-- something, it was done, it was found that. For example, rather than saying I read a book, and I saw that, you might say, studies previously have shown that. And obviously, you would include references to let people know what those studies are. So yeah, I mean, I think it is academic convention. And if you're reading journal articles, et cetera, they're almost always going to be in the third person. But there are certainly instances where it makes more sense to write in the first person, particularly if it's going to be clumsy if you try to write in the third person.

One thing I would caution against is the idea--

ROB MOORE: Oh, and I'm sure--

CLAIRE ARMSTRONG: Oh, sorry. It's just the idea that sometimes people think, OK, I can't write in the first person, but then they say, well, the author believes that, and the author found that. And it really

doesn't help. It just becomes much clumsier. So either write in the first person genuinely, if it's appropriate, or stick to the third person.

ROB MOORE: I absolutely hate the fake third person-- "the author of this assignment believes." We do do some specific Student Hub Live sessions on academic writing. So these are Adobe Connect workshops. So those of you who want to know a bit more on this, check out the ones that are coming up in the future or look at some previous recordings.

And there's a statement that I use when we run those sessions. And that statement is, I don't care what you think or what you believe. I care about what the evidence shows or what you can demonstrate using theory. And it might happen to coincide with what you think or believe. But the argument is not whether or not you think it or believe it. And if we do want you to use reflective first person, that is always really very clear.

Thank you for that, Claire. That's been a great run through some of those skills. We'll come back and do some more of these. I like the bits on skills. It makes my life easier as a tutor. The more my students take these things on board, the better. So very quickly, Marc, you've got one minute to sum up any final comments on the chat pod.

MARC SHUCKSMITH-WESLEY: No pressure. I'll just go to Kyle then initially. And I'm assuming this is linked to Claire's-- where you're based, Claire. And it was just saying how he's indirectly related to a former Irish freedom fighter, his great grandfather's first cousin-- this seems quite removed-- Michael Collins. So I wanted to throw that one out there. But that is a stretch.

Yeah, overall, I just wanted to say the one thing which struck me was how those widgets, those questions-- and you mentioned this yourself, Rob-- you can't really remove any of those, can we, from successful study or successful business. It should have probably been more of a hierarchy of priority or what we feel is the most important in a kind of gradient sense as opposed to which I think is the most important. Because you could probably almost say all of them are equally important. You take Comms out, you fail. You take academic writing out, obviously, you're going to fail. So it was a challenging one for people to pick a favourite out of those, I suppose.

ROB MOORE: OK. Brilliant. Thank you, Mark. So I'd just like to say thank you to Kathryn and Leisel for putting lots of useful links into the chat. So students can take those on board, and if you want to go into more depth you can. Thank you to Allan and Claire for joining me and for that really interesting discussion about those study skills we want to develop. And a bit of an advert Student Hub Live is having an event on busting myths about academic integrity on the 23rd of November. So look out for the links on the Student Hub Live web chat. And I think the link's also in the chat box.

And then the final thing I want to say is you will be getting a link to the feedback form after this session. It's really important that you tell us what you think. We want to be responsive, and we want to react to you in these sessions. So if there's things you want more of, tell us. If there's things you want less of, tell us. Because we want these to be your sessions and you drive the topics that we discuss. So quick thank you to everybody again. It's been a great session. And I look forward to seeing you all again at the next live session. So cheerio from the Study Shack, and I'll see you all again soon.

[AUDIO LOGO]