

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 22, 1995

PARTNERSHIP: A RADICAL APPROACH TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the session is to reconsider the notion of experiential learning by discussing a model which involves class members in almost all aspects of course development and decision making, that is, developing a partnership among the members of the class. The presenter will relate his philosophy and the rationale for this model.

INTRODUCTION

Having had experience as a manager prior to returning to academe, I have always approached my classes with the following question in mind: Given my experience, how can I create a class that simulates the learning process I achieved on the job? It took me a few years before I realized that the decisions I was making in developing the course—what we read and talk about in class (content), how we read it (to memorize or to distill lessons to be applied), when we read it, why we read it, what constitutes performance, how we evaluate that performance, who evaluates—were all managerial issues.

Block (1993), in one of the texts I have used in my undergraduate introductory management course, says the following:

“Setting goals for people, defining the measures of progress toward those goals, and then rewarding them for reaching them does not honor their capabilities.” (p.22)

He’s talking about managers but, in effect, this is what we do as teachers. We make all of the critical managerial decisions before we ever set foot in the classroom, codify them in the syllabus, and then ask our students to join with us and learn about management/leadership. The further irony is, management/leadership is a very practical, hands-on area of study!

I select resource materials, give the students my philosophy of learning, rather self-learning, and, in the most extreme situations, when they turn the page to Course Requirements, that’s all they see—just the title. After that, it’s an adventure with all of us participating in making those decisions. In effect, they apply what they learn in the texts, to making the critical operational decisions in the course. And best of all, they are directly impacted by the quality (or lack thereof) of their decisions. Exactly the way it is in most organizations.

To me, this is a more realistic representation of experiential learning.

In my experience, several things result: First, you can’t help but end up with a true learning community, where what is being learned is also being applied to real problems, i.e., problems that have significant and immediate consequences for the decision-makers. Second, you draw in even the most reticent, going-through-the-motions-type student. Most importantly, at the end of the process, when students look back at what they’ve done together, they have a tremendous sense of accomplishment. I’ve seen this breeding confidence and excitement far beyond what most teachers believe are possible with undergraduate students.

As an example of the power of this model, in an introductory section, we spent three weeks learning this approach. During this time, there was no pressure—no tests, no forced attendance policy, no calling on them in class. I emphasized the dichotomy of trust and control. I could have easily controlled all of these things but I did not. They were to just do the reading assignment (the class had agreed upon) and come to class. If they did not speak in class, there was no way anybody knew if they had read it or not. On the third day of this, I thought it would facilitate class discussion if I gave them a three-minute paper. I gave them a contradiction from the readings and asked them to write for three minutes to organize their thoughts. First of all, they were all there as they had been every day. Second, through the papers (they decided they wanted me to read them; I told them I wouldn’t pick them up without their permission) I found that every person in the class had read it, and they demonstrated knowledge of the reading far beyond the standard. How many of us believe that, if you trust students and give them control, they can produce those kind of outcomes?

The students noticed, however, that less than half the class was talking. So they took that as an organizational problem to solve. They brainstormed a bit, tossed some ideas around, then one student said, “Wait a minute, these all bring external control into this. If we took the personal responsibility to come to class and do the readings, why can’t we just do the same thing when it comes to talking in class?” The number of students participating increased dramatically.

This past semester (Spring 1994), another introductory class of all Freshmen, decided, as their final project, to

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create a campus deli and delivery service. Their goal was to use the class concepts in post-heroic leadership to organize the deli. In only five nights of operation, the class raised \$1800 for a local charity.

Most important, the process the students go through during the semester directly parallels the experience people go through as they move from individual contributor to manager in the workplace. In an ethnographic study of people moving from individual contributors in their organizations to management positions, Hill (1992) describes this process:

‘The new managers described the transformation vividly, weaving tales of coping with the stresses of transformation, reluctantly letting go of deeply held attitudes and habits, and timidly experimenting with new ways of thinking and being. ..The managers began to make the psychological adjustment as they tried to make sense of and struggled with their new agenda-setting and network-building responsibilities.. As an outgrowth of taking action, they mastered four tasks of transformation:

- Learning what it means to be a manager
- Developing interpersonal judgment
- Gaining self-knowledge
- Coping with stress and emotion.” (p. 6)

Overall, I would like people to think about what Bennis (1989) describes as the difference between managers and leaders and the way they are each taught (training vs. education), and perhaps resolve some of the major contradictions that exist between the content we teach and the way we go about teaching it.

REFERENCES

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