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PARTNERSHIP: A NICE IDEA, BUT HOW DO I GET STARTED?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this session is to address the concerns and issues of a "first-time" user of the *Partnership* rnethod of experiential learning (King, 1994). Issues which often arise during the early semesters of use are addressed. Suggestions are rnade for those who would like to implement this pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, Torn and I have talked a great deal about our philosophies of learning and the teaching methods we use to reflect those philosophies. We have both been advocates of experiential learning, but while I have used experiential exercises and simulations, Tom has been developing and refining a teaching style, which he terms the *"Partnership"* method.

In Tom's paper, *Partnership: A Radical Approach to Experiential Learning,* he describes a model of experiential learning which involves class members in almost all aspects of course development and decision making. Tom argues that the decisions we make in developing a course, including content, performance and evaluation are essentially managerial issues, and that encouraging students to address these issues and make the necessary decisions helps move them from the classroom to managers in the workplace.

This made a lot of sense, not only in management courses, but also for the capstone marketing strategy course, which I teach. What Tom was advocating was helping students become managerial decision-makers, exactly what I want for my students. Even so, I had some reservations and a lot of questions. The *Partnership* method would require me to give up control of the class (or so it seemed)! It would require me to trust myself and the students and believe that students want to learn, and will learn, of their own volition. These were difficult concepts to accept.

After talking with Tom and addressing many of my concerns, I committed to using this method in the marketing strategy capstone course. At that point, I found myself addressing the question: "How do I get started?"

In the following sections, we will share with you some of the questions which arose in our discussions, and present suggestions for a syllabus, for the first day, for teaching, and suggestions for evaluating students and ourselves.

The Syllabus:

What should / include on the syllabus? Probably the most important information on the syllabus is your philosophy of teaching and learning. We also find that it is helpful to provide a few core readings which provide a starting point for class discussion.

How do I avoid including too much structure on the syllabus? You may find that you and the students need some structure to begin with. For instance, you may want to notify students that you will have quizzes and assignments to assess whether or not they are learning to apply the concepts. As the semester goes along, you may find you do not need quizzes or that students may want them to assess their own learning, but not for grading purposes.

The First Day (and early in **the semester):**

What do l say the first day? The most important task on the first day is to explain why you are advocating this type of learning and to create an understanding between yourself and the students.

How do I introduce my philosophy and the Partnership concept? What is important is for students to understand that the learning in this class will help them prepare for the learning which will take place for the rest of their lives.

Teaching (and Learning) Issues:

How do / address the blank stares and looks of fear? Don't be afraid of the silence. Don't jump in and answer questions for them and most important, don't solve problems for them. If need be, use nudging, i.e. "Do you understand what I'm asking?", or use challenges, i.e. "Do you really want to do this? Do you want to go back to the straight lecture format?" (Note: Be sure to point out that you are setting them up!)

How do I stimulate contribution in class, especially early in the semester? We use group dynamics techniques, such as nametags, or groups with changing membership. For instance, we have students take a nametag at random, as they enter class. Then, they take turns addressing questions to themselves, but the person with their nametag responds. With groups, we change membership each week so that students get to know everyone in the class.

What if the students get discouraged? Help students understand that the structure, or lack of structure which they are experiencing is not easy to deal with, but is a good experience. We also find that study groups rnay provide a forum for students to share and understand their frustrations.

What if / get discouraged? Remember that we are all learners and will learn from each other and from our failures. If you or the class seems "stuck", ask for help from the students and from other instructors.

What if the class fails to make a decision concerning a specific issue? Bring the decision up immediately during the next class or, if time demands, use your own judgment, but be sure to explain your logic later.

Evaluating Students, the Class, and Ourselves:

How do / evaluate students? You don't! They determine how they will be evaluated.

How do / assess learning? The two-word answer is 'Watch Them!" Watch for improved performance, insight and application of concepts to situations both inside and outside the classroom.

How do / evaluate myself and the Partnership method? We find that 3-minute thought papers work well. Near the end of class, we ask students to write down something they got out of class, something they learned, what they were most confused about and whatever else may be bothering them. Read these papers for suggestions on how to improve the class and your own presentation. Give students feedback on these papers during the next class. Present the issues as problems for the class to solve. Ask for suggestions.

General Questions:

What are my responsibilities in this approach? To provide a setting in which risk and failure is rewarded. To help students take individual responsibility for their decisions. To teach students, and to learn ourselves, to challenge norms.

What are the students' responsibilities in this approach? To apply the concepts which they have learned from the class, from their college career and from life. It is their responsibility to help the class solve problems, to enlighten the class and to help others in the class understand and apply the concepts.

What if it doesn't work? Use the "failure" as a learning experience for all of you.

What do I say to colleagues who wonder what I am doing? Ask them to sit in on your class, as often as possible. Suggest that they talk with students from past classes and those currently enrolled. After you have begun to use this rnethod for a number of semesters, share the results from those classes.

Is there a way I can "try" the Partnership method without using it all semester? By all means! For instance, you might try it on a group project in class. Let students select and design the project, with few or no limitations. Let them suggest/defend how much the project should be worth.

There are many questions, which can and should be ad-dressed (i.e., *What is in it for the students? What is in it for me?),* but given space limitations, we will save them for discussion at the ABSEL meeting.

Our goal in this session is to stimulate interest in this rnethod and to establish a network and contacts for those who want to utilize this method and methods like this. We view ourselves as learners rather than teachers and we hope to continue that learning by sharing our ideas with others at ABSEL.

REFERENCES

King, T.R. (1994). *Partnership: A radical approach to experiential learning.* To be presented at the 1994 Association for Business Simulations and Experiential Learning Annual Conference.