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PARTICIPANT TYPE DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSE TO EXPERIENTIAL METHODS: AN INFORMAL LOOK

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ABSTRACT

Experiential techniques were employed and evaluated in two non-degree granting university operations: a continuing education program and a management development project. Existence of sufficient structural similarities in both of these undertakings permitted a reasonable contrast and comparison of the operational results achieved. Based on this inquiry it would appear that the setting might well be a significant determinant of the effectiveness and efficiency of the use of experiential techniques in ancillary instructional situations. Further, the study suggests the potential need for companion sets of contingency operating instructions to accompany experiential exercises.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that in conventional academic programs experiential techniques are an effective educational technique. To determine if there is support for the thought that the same might well hold true in other teaching situations within the academic community, experiential methods were selectively tried in two different settings: a continuing education program and a management development project.

While these two instances are outside the mainstream of the regular credit-bearing college course tracks, they are auxiliary efforts which are common to many universities. Further, they normally have meaningful similarities which permit reasonable structuring of informal comparison inquiries. For example, both are generally: operational during regular academic semesters; use, to a considerable extent, those materials employed in similar regular college courses; and, are conducted by full-time university faculty teaching in the area.

Too, in this instance, both shared commonalities which further facilitated this study. For example, the two had as their primary objective student acquisition of a similar basic set of management concepts and the development of expertise in their use. Also, each of the two student groups were mixed relative to such student characteristics as age, race, sex, and participant educational levels (which ranged from high-school graduates to holders of masters degrees). Further, all the students were employed in managerial positions and were attending their course on a limited voluntary basis on their own time. The total length of the training was about the same, as were the major topics covered, their sequence, and the time spent on each.

As for differences, perhaps one of the most significant was that the students in the continuing education program were a heterogeneous group, in that they all came from different organizations and were strangers to each other. Conversely, those in the management development project were a homogeneous group, being drawn from the same organization and were well-known to each other. Also, those in the former group were all at entry-level positions, while those in the latter were at mid-level. Too, students in continuing education paid a tuition fee, which in many

instances was refundable by their employers. Those in management development were not involved with fees, the entire cost of the project being assumed by their organization under a contractual arrangement. Lastly, the continuing education students were under significantly less employer pressure to attend sessions than those in the management development project.

PROCEDURE

The continuing education group consisted of 33 Students enrolled in a management certificate program at a northeastern university during the Fall 1979 semester. While the major instructional techniques employed were traditional lecture and discussion methods, experiential exercises were used throughout the course. These exercises were primarily role plays, hybrid critical incidents, and self-analysis studies. With the exception of an examination at the end of the course, consisting of short case studies, there were no other formal evaluations of student performance. While attendance records were maintained, they were for administrative purposes only.

The management development group was made up of 30 students employed by a large municipal social agency in a major northeastern city. All worked in the area of personnel services. The project was conducted in a similar setting as the continuing education program: same facilities, time period, and instructor. The major instructional method, however, was somewhat different, being about equally divided between lecturettes, cassettes, and experiential techniques. While there was objective pre- and post-testing, designed to try and measure the effectiveness of the overall project, this instrumentation was not employed in evaluating student performance per se. Again, attendance records were maintained only for record purposes.

The continuing education program ran two hours per week for ten weeks, while the management development project was conducted in three sessions of seven hours each. The major topics covered, in both situations, were: the management process, motivation, and leadership. Peripheral subjects treated included time management, stress, and conflict resolution. A generic approach was employed in that the material was not cast in a private, public, or not-for-profit sector context. Further, in both settings, an intellectual environment was maintained in which an open exchange of ideas and thoughts was encouraged.

The following three research questions provided the underpinnings for this informal inquiry.

1. Do experiential methods appear to be a suitable instructional method for university-based continuing education programs and management development projects?
2. Are there specific techniques within the field which seem to be better, or worse, than the others for use in these two settings?

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3. What, if any, are the apparent major benefits and costs in using experiential techniques in these two situations?

Inputs to formulate indications of what might well be the answers to these three questions was gleaned using informal observations and unstructured student feedback.

FINDINGS

Generally, experiential techniques were not well received by the students enrolled in the continuing education program. If one used student acceptance as a measure of effectiveness, it may well be concluded that they were not a suitable instructional method. This negative reception appeared to be related to the expectations of the program participants, in that they seemed to want maximum teaching in class. Learning was to be pursued, on an individual basis, between classes. The informal objective appeared to be to gather in as much information as possible during each class session: transformation of the attained information into learning to be affected between sessions.

Conversely, experiential techniques appeared to be well received by the students in the management development project. Again, assuming student acceptance to be a valid measure, it can probably be said that they were a suitable instructional method. Here the objective of the formal sessions, as far as the students were concerned, seemed to focus on learning. Teaching, in the form of self-acquisition of information, was to be accomplished between sessions. The participants appeared to feel that their time in class could best be spent in taking advantage of the group setting to transform acquired knowledge into useful learning.

As for specific techniques which seemed to be better or worse than others, in the case of the continuing education program, exercises that appeared to be comparatively well received were those that dealt with self-analysis. In particular, those that provided the student with an immediate personal reading of the figure of merit of a particular personally posed ability, expertise, knowledge level, or the like were received with relative enthusiasm. Techniques not comparatively well received appeared to be those in which there was no immediate apparent individual return. Unless there was some student-perceived tangible instantaneous payoff, it seemed as if the exercise was considered by the participants to be a time waster.

Again, somewhat of a reverse finding was noted in the case of the management development group. While all types of exercises appeared to be favorably received, there was a certain hesitancy noted with the self-analysis variety. They seemed to be viewed, at times, as potentially threatening, although on balance the reception was decidedly more favorable than unfavorable.

Concerning particularly noted benefits, in the case of the continuing education program, the exercises served well as icebreakers. When the class first started there were only strangers pursuing their own self-interest. Following usage of the first exercise, there was significant movement toward a collective group seeking common goals. Further, there was a favorable spill-over effect resulting from the increased class cohesiveness in the form of a shortening of the distance between instructor and student.

As to costs in the continuing education setting, two can be

cited in particular. First were the losses associated with fitting loose time requirements of some experiential techniques into rigid class schedules. This inability to affect congruence resulted in diminished levels of efficiency. Second, there was the problem of start-up. As many experiential methods are cast in a particular setting, members of a mixed background group come up to operating speed at different times, depending on how quickly they relate to the environmental packaging of the exercise. The resulting staggering of the forward motion of the participants makes it difficult to fix an optimum rate at which the exercise should be unfolded.

In the management development project there were also major benefits worth noting. Initially, the students assumed an operating set in the class which paralleled their organizational arrangement on the job. This posture tended, at times, to restrict a free interchange of thought. The use of experiential exercises helped overcome this barrier and relatively quickly a free-flowing exchange, unrestricted by carry-overs from the work place, became the standard operating procedure. Too, experiential techniques served well in revitalizing student interest if it started to lag. Breaks, or shifts, in the instructional method appeared to work well in precluding boredom, especially in the longer session setting.

As to the costs in the management development project arrangement, there was the problem of how best to truncate a lively discussion. Having gotten the group into motion, if a stop was improperly applied, the exercise could terminate on a dysfunctional note. Too, while there is a high probability that in any group there will be those that dislike experiential work, they will generally hold this feeling in check and participate. Here, however, such dislike was rather outwardly displayed, there was a reluctance to participate, and some mild disruptive behavior was shown. While this negativism was troublesome, perhaps more troublesome was the fact that the fall-out carried forward long after the end of the experiential exercise.

DISCUSSION

It is recognized that this study is a preliminary inquiry of an informal nature, which was fitted to the constraints and influences of the involved environmental and organizational setting. While participant observation and anecdotal feedback do form the major underpinnings of the findings, there is a sufficient validity to the inquiry, when measured in terms of the intent of the study, to warrant serious thought.

As to suggested insights growing out of this work, it may well be said that experiential techniques, like many management concepts, are situationally bound. For example, in continuing education programs, the informal contract generally appears to be one dealing with the supplying and purchasing of tangible information. An immediate and obvious worth must be perceived for the attachment of value. As experiential techniques normally enhance practices, and over the long run, normally they are felt to be of limited worth to those seeking a quick on-the-spot return. Conversely, in management development projects it is generally the perception of the participants that they have the basic tools, but lack sufficient expertise in their use. Consequently, things are desired which can sharpen, or enhance, skill ability to transform principles into practices.

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In both settings, exercises which privately tell people something about themselves are generally well received. But, if that something is not private, or there is a threat that it may not remain private, that apparently changes the situation. If the reading is unfavorable, and there is a possibility that this fact may become known to an employer, or an enemy, then the exercise will probably be viewed with disfavor regardless of the setting.

As to the cost and benefits noted, they were generally similar to those of a credit bearing course case. In particular, underscored was the worth of experiential techniques as a method of enhancing the togetherness of the group, with the accompanying lessening of student perceived input reception barriers attributable to class members and the instructor. Not anticipated, however, was the cost associated with the use of exercises not cast in a familiar context. For example, while one would normally anticipate that talking about the allocation of a specific item, a new truck for instance, to a group of personnel specialists would be no problem, apparently mentally substituting a typewriter for a truck can be troublesome for some. Trying to maintain a generic approach to topical coverage is dysfunctional too. Certain specificity is required to achieve some level of reasonable effectiveness and efficiency.

While similar findings growing out of this inquiry can be made, perhaps of more importance are the following points. First, experiential techniques appear to be suitable for use in university ancillary Instructional endeavors. Second, it would seem that exercises cannot simply be transferred for usage from one setting to another. A certain amount of selection and modification is required to achieve a match with the environment and the composition of the group. Third, perhaps thinking by those interested in experiential methods should now be turned outward to consider such issues as to where the field might well be going, how it may best get there, and what will be its mission on arrival.

EPILOGUE

Two kinds of exercises were used: individual and small group. Individual exercises were those that the students could generally conduct on their own. Group exercises were those that required the student to work in concert with others in the class. The intent of the former was to develop a keener inner understanding of the presented managerial concepts, primarily through self-assessment. The objective of the latter was to promote an enhanced appreciation of the specific managerial principles being offered, basically through peer comparisons of thought, approach, and perception. For both, the particular exercises selected for use were established standardized techniques drawn from the literature.

About six months following completion of the two classes, a number of students from each were informally queried as to the desirability of continued use of these experiential techniques in teaching situations similar to those with which they had been associated. Those who were involved in the continuing education program generally expressed the opinion that use of the exercises should be continued, but more emphasis should be placed on individual types and less on group varieties. Those who were in the management development project agreed, too, that the exercises should continue to be used, but, conversely, felt that the thrust should be on group, rather than individual, types.

Thus, while there was agreement as to the worth of experiential exercises, there was disagreement as to the most suitable type. That there should be disagreement is understandable as the settings and group compositions were different. However, there is not much information available in the field, upon which the practitioner can draw, as to the where and when of exercise use, how exercises may best be modified to enhance compatibility with various operating

arrangements, and how the cost/benefit ratio may be improved under differing end goals and objectives.

What this suggests is the need for more and better research in the subject area beyond the bounds of the development of improved experiential techniques, and their use in traditional degree-granting programs. Unfortunately, however, the research methodology which perhaps relates best to this need, a holistic approach, is not that which is normally considered to be choice in the academic arena. Soft inquiries are often equated to the treatment of that which is of comparatively little importance or significance, and hence not normally pursued. Exploratory case studies, for example, are generally perceived to be of less worth than rigorous hypothesis-testing research. However, this is not to suggest that analytically oriented work is not desirable or required, only that deep quantitatively enriched studies are not the only types of inquiries needed. Certainly numbers are important, but perhaps of equal importance are better insights and understandings of the implications of experiential techniques to the overall field of university teaching and learning, coupled with a better understanding as to how techniques which comprise this discipline may best be employed in the various educational settings to be found in academia.