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WHAT IS IT THAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO LEARN: PROCESS OR CONTENT?

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses pedagogical assumptions underlying a good deal of experiential learning approaches. Both the predominantly applied character of business courses generally and the nature of experience-based learning seem to lead to an inherent emphasis on the learning of process as opposed to content. After reviewing the content" versus process arguments, the paper suggests a pedagogic model, based on problem-solving research, in which the issue is not whether to emphasize one at the expense of the other, but instead how to integrate the two for more efficient and effective learning. The role of content as a foundation for efficient communication and for conditions of application of processes is discussed. Based on research in instructional and cognitive psychology, both the "content" and process" concepts are refined and enriched, and the degree to which each should be emphasized is related to the instructional level and course objectives, and to the individual student's motivation and capacity for "self-monitoring. The paper suggests that instructors, especially those relying heavily on experiential learning programs, should consciously develop internally consistent pedagogic strategies for individual courses.

INTRODUCTION

If you ask a child what they learn in school, she is likely to say things. However, some of us in higher education find fault with pedagogical approaches, which stress the knowing of things. The basic premise of experiential learning is that basic knowledge is present, but that the focus of the educational activity should be on the practical implementation of that basic knowledge as well as on higher order processes such as the abilities to focus, organize, compare, analyze, infer, predict, elaborate, integrate, and evaluate. This paper is concerned with this content versus process distinction.

THE CASE FOR PROCESS

Some of us who are of the experiential learning persuasion have tended to focus on the higher learning objectives expressed in Bloom's taxonomy. We believe that students need to look for patterns among variables, to seek out relationships. Further, it is the process of looking for those relationships that is what we believe is learned. In other words, we carry the philosophy of 'It's not the answers, which are important, hut rather learning how to ask the right question? toward the extreme. By presenting students with real experiences that they have to structure and handle, we are promoting the learning of the decision making process.

When we talk to people in industry, the feedback is not that the students need to know more about marketing strategy or market research. We more frequently hear that they need better critical thinking, communication, and interpersonal skills. These skills reflect more the "how" of business courses which we teach and not the what of the courses. A good course, regardless of its definition in the curriculum guide, should require the student to participate in a proactive manner, and feedback as to the quality of that participation is critical in order to insure that the experience leads to a more efficient, more effective, and more enjoyable subsequent experience.

THE CASE FOR CONTENT

With respect to content, it appears that we have often assumed that the requisite understanding exists. While the quality of an experiential exercise is a function of the richness experienced by the student, we must acknowledge that the mere exposure to experiential approaches is insufficient. All of us have probably tried experiential approaches, which yielded more confusion than learning. Quite possibly, we have assumed incorrectly that students possess the appropriate frame of reference and the requisite skills for acquiring and applying the skills upon which the success of an experiential exercise rests.

While many of us find the memorization of facts, figures, and formulae to be busywork, the role of general knowledge in society is of vital importance to development of cultural literacy. Cultural literacy provides the basic framework upon which we communicate. Hirsch (1987, p. 31) notes that, to thrive, a child needs to learn the traditions of the particular human society and culture it is born into. Similarly, reading comprehension involves the implicit assumption that the reader has a basic cultural literacy. Every textbook, even the most elementary, implies information that it takes or granted and does not explain. Knowing such information is the decisive skill of reading (Hirsch 1987, p. 112). Being culturally literate is socially enabling. While knowledge for knowledge's sake has little value, but knowledge as a basis for business and social interaction has great value.

CONCLUSION

The standard discussion of Bloom's taxonomy is that all levels of learning, from Basic Knowledge to Objective Evaluation, will be present in every course, even those in elementary schools. A more realistic perspective would be that we acknowledge that all courses will no doubt involve a variety of levels, but that the relative emphasis on the different levels varies greatly. This leads to the conclusion that instructors need to be flexible in their general approach to teaching. Have Pedagogy, Will Not Travel," so to speak. Those instructors given the opportunity to teach both introductory and advanced courses need to be very careful to avoid the trap of the comfortable pedagogy.

This admonition has special relevance to those of us of the experiential persuasion, just as it does to those who lecture/test regardless of the level of the course. If the students do not have the "cultural literacy" to communicate efficiently with business people, then the live case approach should be avoided until they have acquired sufficient content. Experiential techniques emphasizing process are very appropriate in an applied discipline like Business, but we must acknowledge that they are more appropriate in some instances than in others.

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