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THE USE OF EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING TECHNIQUES: CREATIVITY vs. CONFORMITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need for the expansion of experimental and experiential (E&E) teaching techniques using creative methods and approaches. It contrasts traditional, more conformist academic styles with a more creative style, which is needed to enrich the classroom educational situation. Through the use of the methodology of Improvisatory Theatre (IT), an example of the classroom use of E&E is discussed. In summary, the paper seeks to promote experiential learning and creativity as a way to enhance learning and education.

INTRODUCTION

One of the concerns often articulated in the academic environment is the criticism regarding non-dynamic or non-effective teaching. This is particularly "en vogue" at present because of the added emphasis on or Outcomes demanded by academic administrators, legislative bodies whom appropriate funds, boards of directors/visitors, and others who influence academic performance and funding. As an example, one need only read Allan Blooms The Closing of the American Mind in order to review the supposed current crisis in American higher education. One of the current criticisms of academic performance is that teaching is mundane; i.e., that it is not creative enough or innovative enough or that teaching is non-dynamic in delivery. In essence, this criticism or argument must be evaluated in light of a continuum or systemic approach that has academic creativity as one boundary and

academics, the dynamics in a more creative direction.

SOCIALIZATION

College and university professors are socialized creatures, having been made to undergo intense socialization and "normalization" while in graduate school. In essence, the "Ph.D. process" is itself usually antithetical to the enhancement of creativity. The doctoral student soon learns that conformity (to professorial, departmental, college, and university "NORMS") is the surest road to successful completion of the program ("getting credentialed") rather than any "radicalism" smacking of creativity. Graduate students learn "how to do it" They learn how to speak, write, use jargon, and prepare things in a "journalistic style" (for publication, of course), but rarely do they learn to use creativity, especially as it might apply to the teaching environment. In addition, graduate students learn to copy "a professorialized mode of teaching."

E&E - A CREATIVE APPROACH

In order to formulate and implement a more creative approach to university teaching, ideas and techniques of an innovative character should be considered. Experientialism and experimentation (E&E) are two of these techniques that have proven useful in enhancing the quality of the classroom educational experience. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on the incorporation of these and other techniques into the social-

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

ization process described above and into the professional development process of academicians. Professors need to acquire and utilize a broader range of skills for use in their teaching environments. The use of this broader range of skills should lead to a more productive and higher quality teaching environment in two distinct areas:

- (a) LEARNING: E&E for example, are “learning-enhancers”. The breadth and depth brought about by experimentation is worth considering. Experimentation is possible on either the micro or the macro level of teaching. An example of the micro-level would be the incorporation of audio-visual techniques in a classroom situation where they had not been previously utilized in order to promote better visualization and conceptualization of course materials. An example of the macro-level would be to utilize and experiment with a whole new range of teaching methodologies or teaching approaches to be used in the course or curriculum. Both of these examples have the potential for the enhancement of student learning.
- (b) EMOTIVE: E&E are also “emotive- enhancers”, bringing to the classroom environment a more rewarding, interesting, exciting, and entertaining “set” and “mix” that enhance student motivation for learning. Experientialism is particularly useful as an “emotive-enhancer” because of the wide variety of situations, responses, and intensities that are possible in the classroom setting utilizing experiential exercises and techniques. Response variations generated by students to experiential techniques often produce varied and sometimes unexpected results. However, most of these results are still beneficial to both the student and the professor.

In summary, E&E adds creativity and innovation to the teaching environment. The use of E&E as a creative approach is still not without career risk, however. The more conformist approach is often the “dominant norm” in many departments, colleges, and universities. If the organizational reward structure is heavily tied to the use of conformist approaches and teaching techniques, then potential creativity (using E&E for example) may be too risky for a professor to formulate and use. Hence, creativity is inhibited and little is done with E&E or other techniques.

E&E - AN EXAMPLE

During the past seven years, the authors have reviewed and “tried out” numerous E&E ideas, exercises, and techniques as evidenced by the references for this article (1-31). One of the most rewarding and possibly

far-reaching techniques they have used is the application of IMPROVISATORY THEATRE (IT) to the business classroom teaching environment in OR, OD, or OC courses. (18X25)(28)(29) Using IT (Improvisatory Theatre) casts the professor directly into the roles of actor, director, producer, choreographer, etc. The professor is expected to be well-prepared, smooth and capable in order to explain, demonstrate, and exemplify the IT techniques. How should a professor become prepared for the use of the IT techniques? The answer must come from the flexibility allowed by the creative approach rather than the conformist one. Perhaps as an aside to their business school rigorous preparation, graduate students interrogated in OR should be encouraged to undertake formal IT training in The College of Communication and Theatre Arts. Perhaps young academicians (or more mature ones also) should be encouraged to seek IT training as a part of their professional development. The results of seeking such IT training would appear to be beneficial.

The success of the IT technique has been partially assessed by the authors during the past seven years and the results have proved positive in both categories mentioned above:

(a) Learning Enhancement and (b) Emotive Enhancement. Students have offered a great deal more in the way of positive response to the use of IT techniques than in the form of negative criticism. Most of the negative criticism has been by students who felt they were being “inconvenienced” by the use of the IT techniques. This was probably a correct assessment in that the use of IT techniques does require more creativity and hard work on the part of the student than the normative lecture environment (DRONE-DRONE-DRONE). Several of the authors previous works as listed in the references, address the issues of student workload, expectations, performance, etc., and suggest some professorial preparation techniques that might be helpful in implementing the IT technique and addressing student concerns (“no surprises rule”, etc.).(18)(25)

SUMMARY

The purpose of this article has been to contrast creativity and conformity in the teaching environment. The background of the problem of non-creative, non-dynamic teaching has been examined in the SOCIALIZATION section of the article. The formulation, development, and implementation of experimentation and experientialism (E&E) as creative techniques for enhancing (a) LEARNING and (b) EMOTIVISM have been discussed. Improvisatory Theatre (IT) as an example of an E&E technique that has been successfully utilized by

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

the authors have been discussed. Through the use of the authors professional teaching experience as reported in the references (1-31), documentation has been offered to support the article's contention. We need to move away from conformist approaches in the teaching environment and move toward more creative approaches such as the use of E&E in teaching in order to enrich both the student and professorial experiences.

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Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

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