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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ABOUT THE WORLD OF WORK: A PROGRAM FOR PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of an experiential learning program designed to sensitize primary and secondary school educators to the world of work. The program's objectives, evolution, and the experiential learning perspectives which have guided it over the last eight years are discussed. The design and learning outcomes of the 1985 program session illustrate implementation and results of the program.

INTRODUCTION

In 1977 the Trident Work Education Council initiated a pilot program designed to introduce Charleston, South Carolina, area primary and secondary school teachers to the world of business and non-academic work. The objectives of the program were (a) to develop a more complete understanding by the educators of the workplace and the workers, and their roles in maintaining the American economic system, (b) to bring educators into direct contact with the "products" of the education system, to enable the educators to assess the impact of education on developing human potential, and (c) to assist the educator in formulating plans for new individual and institutional efforts to aid youth in their transition from school to work. This paper will describe the evolution of the program and the experiential learning perspectives which have guided it over the last eight years.

THE PROGRAM

The public school system has often been considered a training ground for the world of work. Educators and corporate leaders have called for increased cooperation between schools and businesses to help students make the transition from the role of student to the role of worker. While controversy exists over the extent to which schools should accept this role of career education [4], few would argue with the basic premise that schools do play a major role in the socialization process from childhood to adulthood, and that work is an important role for adults in our society.

In an effort to address this issue, the Trident Work-Education Council, a group of business and education leaders in the Charleston metropolitan area, sought to close the gap between education and business by educating public school educators about the world of work outside academia. Their rationale was that by educating educators in the world of business, these educators would have an experiential, as well as cognitive, basis for communicating their knowledge to students.

The Summer Work Education Program (SWEP) began as a pilot project in the summer of 1977. Three Charleston area high school guidance counselors were employed by the Robert Bosch Corporation for a period of eight weeks. They were rotated through a minimum of three different jobs during the course of the program and were asked to write a report at the conclusion of the program. The report was high in its praise for the Bosch plant and the Work-Education Council for implementing the program and stressed the need for continuation of similar efforts. Based upon this report, the dedication of the Work-Education Council, and funding for tuition costs from the General Electric Education Foundation, a commitment arose to expand the program in the summer of 1978.

The program as it exists now consists of a work experience component and an academic component. The work experience component places each educator in an entry level job in a local business organization. The educators work full time for four days per week and are paid by the sponsoring organizations. Each organization is responsible for orienting their educators, assigning work responsibilities, and assigning a work supervisor. The educators are considered temporary full time employees.

The academic component consists of seven full day classes which meet once before the educators begin work and once each week thereafter. Participants in the program earn three hours of graduate credit in education at The Citadel for the work and academic experience.

Program participants are selected from voluntary applications to the program. The criteria for selection include the quality of applicants' essays describing their interest in the program and the number of positions available in local organizations. Efforts are made to maximize representation from the three participating county school districts.

MAXIMIZING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning in the program depends on cooperation between three important elements--the instructor(s), the work site, and the educator/participant.

Role of the Instructor(s)

Our efforts as instructors to maximize experiential learning of SWEP participants were based on Kolb's theory of experiential learning [3]. Kolb suggests "that learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it" [3, p. 41]. The learning process may begin with the stages of Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, or Active Experimentation, but an individual must experience the entire cycle if learning is to occur.

The academic component of the course was designed to correspond with the learning cycle. (The 1985 course outline is available from the authors.) The educators experienced the world of work at their worksites (Concrete Experience). Reflective Observation was facilitated by having the educators record their observations daily in a journal and sharing their reflections in each class with other participants. Abstract Conceptualization was facilitated by integrating observations with previous understandings of the nature of work and new information provided in readings, lectures, and videotapes. The educators then returned to the workplace each week for Active Experimentation, testing what had been learned. Thus, the academic component was a vehicle for reflecting on work experience, making sense of it, and encouraging experimentation with the new knowledge.

Several methods were used to facilitate learning in the classroom sessions. As mentioned above, the journal assignment encouraged participants to record and reflect upon their observations. Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory was administered during the first class period before participants started work. Discussion of the results and participation in a simulation experience linking learning style with approaches to problem solving [1] oriented participants to the learning methodology of the program. Each student also completed a learning contract (Appendix) which assisted in establishing objectives for personal learning. Learning contracts were shared in dyads established at the beginning of the program and reinforced on three separate occasions when the partners got together to assess each others' progress. Group site visits to locations of two participating organizations, a manufacturing organization and a service organization, and two videotapes ("America Works When America Works" and "In Search of Excellence") broadened the participants' exposure to different types of organizations and work.

From the first day, the instructors encouraged comparison between the summer jobs and school jobs. The first written assignment was to write a job description for each. Comparisons continued to be made in every discussion. In the fifth session, the topic was motivation, and the Job Diagnostic Survey [2] was administered, evaluating the extent to which summer jobs and teaching jobs contributed to individuals' motivation. In virtually all cases, the teachers rated their teaching jobs as more motivating, to the surprise of many of the teachers! Classroom autonomy was appreciated and the limitations of money as a motivator were noted. In the journals and final papers eight of the twelve 1985 participants explicitly stated that an outcome of the program was a recommitment to teaching.

The applied assignment was for each person to write three separate lesson plans which could be presented to their students in classes or to colleagues in in-service workshops. As in all segments of the course, diversity was emphasized--diversity of methodology and of audience. One of these plans was presented by each person on the final class day. While the quality of individual plans was satisfactory, the serious attempt to write different plans indicated that the students where stretching their minds and applying what they had been learning. It is not possible to predict whether all these plans will be implemented, although some certainly will.

Role of the Work Sites

A total of ten work sites were utilized for the 1985 SWEP. We have found that two work site variables have significant effects upon the success of the educators' experience-the work site supervisor's cooperativeness and understanding of the program, and the level of the supervisor in the organization's hierarchy. The importance of cooperation from work site supervisors cannot be underestimated. We have found considerable variation in the level of involvement of work site supervisors. Supervisors who meet with their educators on a weekly basis to review work experience enhance and support the learning objectives of the program. Supervisors who are not prepared for the educators, who shunt the educators off from supervisor to supervisor or job to job without attempting to integrate the total experience, or who do not meet regularly with the educators tend to be a negative influence. Fortunately, there have been few of these experiences in the program.

The level of the supervisor within the organization also has an impact on success. In many cases, the sponsoring organization's contact person for the program was not the actual work supervisor. For example, in one organization the contact person was the director of human resource development who then assigned the educators to line supervisors. The line supervisors were not familiar with the program and were unprepared for the educators and this had a negative impact on the educators' experience in the organization. We have found that if the contact person is in a staff position in the organization and will not be the supervisor, it is imperative that the contact person have a good working relationship with line supervisors and that supervisors understand the nature of the program. If the contact person is a line supervisor he or she must also understand the nature of the program and have the time and willingness to meet with educators on a weekly basis to discuss their progress.

Role of the Educators/Participants

AB in any learning endeavors, the attitudes, expectations, and motivation of the learner will affect the depth and breadth of learning. We have found that participants enter the program with great diversity on all those variables. Some educators are interested in a summer job, some in determining whether a change in career is viable for them, and some want to enhance their students' understanding of the world of work. It is important to acknowledge and accommodate these differences. Throughout the program, the instructors emphasized that participants develop and monitor personal learning objectives through the learning contract. We believe this encouragement facilitated learning by encouraging participants to be responsible for their own learning.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

A review of the educators' course evaluations and journals indicated that learning occurred for most people on four different levels. First, the educators learned about the world of work. Many participants had never held jobs outside of education. For these people, working in blue collar, entry level jobs forced them to reflect on the type of work experience that many of their students would be encountering when they left school. Most participants knew that many jobs were dirty, boring, and unsatisfying but had never experienced this type of work. The SWEP gave them an opportunity to directly experience these jobs and to interact with others who experienced this type of work on a day to day basis. Participants also experienced the diversity of jobs available in our society. Many held jobs that were not dirty, boring, and unsatisfying and the sharing of these experience in class broadened the learning experience for all.

The second level of learning was about the role and operation of the private sector of the economy. Participants learned about the importance of the profit motive and the difference between private and public sector organizations. Many interesting discussions evolved around issues such as accountability to external groups (e.g., stockholders vs. boards of education) manufacturing vs. service organizations, and the impact of foreign competition on the American economy. Participants learned that their "products," the graduates of the public schools, would have a direct impact on the productivity of our economic system through the learning of work attitudes, values, and behaviors in the school systems. Many participants were, thus, able to more clearly conceptualize their own roles in the American economic system.

A third level of learning was about the participants, themselves, and their own ideas about careers. Educators who had experienced "burnout" in the teaching profession and were considering career changes had an opportunity to experiment with different jobs in an unthreatening way. They were able to develop new skills and test themselves in new environments without having to make long term commitments to the changes. For many participants, the direct comparison between their summer jobs and their teaching jobs resulted in a renewal of commitment to teaching. For a few, the comparison convinced them that they would be more comfortable outside the teaching profession. Regardless of the outcome, this experience broadened their conceptions of work and jobs and provided information for future career decision making.

The fourth level of learning concerned the importance of experience itself in the learning process. It is one thing to read about the changing nature of work in our society, but to experience it in the work place is altogether different. Participants shared the trials and tribulations of the work force by interacting with workers and actually doing the work. The lesson plans developed by many participants for their students and colleagues incorporated participant experience in their learning designs. It is difficult to assess the extent to which the SWEP experience will actually affect teacher behavior in the classroom, but we were able to observe at least short term effects through teacher comments in their journals and the design of lesson plans.

One final observation about learning outcomes is in regard to the process of learning through experience. We observed that learning about work emerged gradually throughout the program. As participants moved through the learning cycle themselves, we found that the depth of insights and learning increased over time. This was evident in the progressively more insightful journal entries and classroom discussions. Again, by adopting a theory of experiential learning to guide program development, we were able to anticipate participants' experience to some degree and to plan activities and assignments which would facilitate learning over time. We strongly recommend that similar projects designed to encourage learning through experience be theory based for the benefit of participants, instructors, and for the advancement of experiential learning theory and applications.

APPENDIX

LEARNING CONTRACT

LEARNER:_____ DATES:_____ SETTING:_____

OBJECTIVE: What do I want to learn?

MOTIVATION: Why I want to learn it.

METHOD: How I plan to learn it: resources and strategies.

EVALUATION: How I will know I have learned it.

SUPPORT: The kind of feedback that is most helpful to me.

REFERENCES

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[4] O'Toole, James, "Problem of Work and Aims of Career Education," in James O'Toole (editor), Works Learning) and the American Future, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977, pp. 106-135).