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TO USE OR NOT TO USE EXPERIENTIAL TECHNIQUES THAT IS THE QUESTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to focus on some of the benefits and costs of utilizing experiential techniques from the perspective of the instructor. Benefits such as reduced boredom, increased status and improved teaching effectiveness are proposed, while costs such as time and effort requirements, variances in student expectations and limited peer support are identified. Interdisciplinary approaches are suggested as potential answers to reducing costs and increasing benefits.

INTRODUCTION

One problem from a management perspective regarding the use of experiential techniques is whether from the perspective of the professor the inducements offered as rewards are reasonably equivalent to the contributions required of him as an instructor. While the advantages and disadvantages of experiential learning have been and continue to be discussed from the point of view of the student (consumer), the purpose of this paper is to focus the panel discussion on some of the costs and benefits an instructor (producer) might wish to assess before utilizing a nontraditional instructional methodology. It is well recognized that change of any magnitude and significance brings with it some very real and imagined costs. Experiential learning represents change and it does have costs, but it also offers an instructor some potential benefits.

Benefits

One benefit that an instructor may receive from using a simulation or experiential exercise is renewed stimulation. Boredom does not seem to affect all instructors equally, however, just as with our use of job enlargement in industry one might expect that change for the sake of change could provide some positive individual benefits. It might be debated, of course, whether experiential instructional approaches should be viewed as job enlargement or job enrichment but in either case a break away from traditional methods or routines may renew lagging instructor interest.

A second though sometimes illusive benefit to the instructors using experiential learning in their courses is the status attributed to those engaged in innovative instruction. It is difficult today to find a university that doesn't offer grants or awards to individuals willing to develop or apply new instructional approaches. Clearly, the introduction of a simulation or experiential exercise is a frequently extolled innovation in many business courses. Whether an instructor wishes to consider innovativeness as a benefit depends upon the impact he perceives it having on his self or public image.

One final benefit which must be alluded to is the potential improvement experiential techniques may have on teaching effectiveness. While some may wish to differentiate between that part of the instructional process controlled by the instructor (teaching) and that part controlled by the student (learning), it is sufficient to say that support for the use of simulations and experiential exercises in instructional efforts can be found in empirical research. Of course, the significance of the benefits relative to the associated costs has been questioned by other researchers but most observers

tend to agree that simulations as well as experiential exercises may teach students of business some important skills and techniques as or more effectively than traditional lecture and discussion methods.

Costs

Although users of simulations and other experiential techniques often find issues upon which to disagree, one very real cost that most users will attest to is the time demands associated with start-up. It is evident to most instructors that doing something different requires additional effort. However, if the system is not used to accommodate the possible unique requirements of various experiential techniques, little things like class time in sufficient length to accommodate a complete exercise, rooms with moveable chairs, same day or half day turn around on an overloaded computer all become major hurdles in the path of the unsuspecting instructor. It is intuitively clear that traditional lecture discussion class formats place fewer demands on the support system and the individual instructor.

Another similar cost that an instructor may anticipate paying is associated with attempting to satisfy the varying expectations of students. While it may be true that students enjoy simulations and experiential exercises, their enjoyment is not always expressed in positive evaluations of the instructor. It is often difficult to convince cost-conscious business students that nonlecturing instructors in a classroom should be paid or given credit for teaching. The author is familiar with an ongoing analysis of evaluations associated with a capstone course required of all business majors which consistently shows significant variance between academic disciplines. Specifically, accounting majors tend to rate all aspects of this capstone course, which involves a simulation, much lower than marketing or management majors who previously have participated in experiential exercises as part of their normal course work. The fact that students may develop certain learning expectations from prior educational experiences may suggest that the costs to the instructor who violates these expectations may be very low or very high. If a student likes experiential learning, he often likes it a great deal; if he dislikes it, he hates it and the instructor.

Certainly, a final problem that may represent a significant cost to beginning instructors is support from their peers. Violators of group norms learn to expect some sanctions and at least today on most campuses simulations and experiential techniques are still viewed as "different." Colleagues, like students, often perceive that instructors receiving high evaluations using nontraditional methods such as experiential exercises obtain their rating because of the techniques, not because of the instructor's ability and skill.