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EXPERIENTIAL PROCESSING OF DIFFERING MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVES: THE USE OF A GAME SHOW FORMAT

R. Duane Ireland, Oklahoma State University
J. Duane Hoover, Texas Tech University

ABSTRACT

The pedagogical technique described in this paper is one which permits student learning to take place at both the cognitive (content) and the affective (process) level. The mechanics of this particular “total person” approach to the teaching of an Organizational Behavior course are fully detailed in the paper. Additionally, several beneficial by-products which the instructor can anticipate resulting from the use of the authors’ game show format are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

The use of experiential techniques as a pedagogical tool is principally founded on the belief that “whole-person” learning is not necessarily one-dimensional. For example, Hoover states:

Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant(s) cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement [4, p. 35].

Finn and Smead comment on some of the consequences of this procedure:

Experiential learning tools force the student to become experienced in the problem area and to become, in effect, his own expert source of information. The nature of a simulation game puts the student in a problem solving mode and the information gained from the experience becomes internalized [2, pp. 201-202].

Experiential techniques offer a second and related potential benefit to the student; namely, the opportunity to learn on two different levels. Samuel Certo considers this point in the following commentary:

the experiential exercise . . . insures that student-trainee learning is taking place on two levels. The first level is the content of the experiential exercise. Content includes all statements and activities which a training group must know in order to reconstruct and reflect on what happened in an experiential exercise. The second level is the process through which an experiential exercise was performed. Process issues focus not only on what was said and who said it, but on how it was said, and what the consequences of the statement(s) were [1, p. 114].

Thus, through the conduct of experiential exercises, learning can occur both at the cognitive (content) and the affective (process) level.

These characteristics of the experiential approach are quite well documented and generally accepted by practitioners in the field. However, experiential learning’s

“image” still suffers somewhat from “touchie-feelie” stereotyping. Good news for practitioners is that a recent study in the Journal of Experiential Learning and Simulation reports success using the “whole-person” format:

This study indicates that the positive elements of the experiential approach can be developed and retained without sacrificing cognitive performance if the cognitive element is blended and integrated into the total learning experience of the individual student [5, p. 4].

The experiential exercise described in this paper was designed to provide an opportunity for learning to occur at the level of the whole learning person. The description of the exercise can thus be viewed as an example of an application of the total person approach.

The Differing Perspectives Perspective

The discovery and adoption of the contingency approach has done some marvelous things for the field of management and organizational behavior. The answer has become “It depends. . .”, and skillful instructors in these fields have often mastered the art of not having to address the nitty-gritty question of “Depends on what?” Teaching organizational behavior thus can often take on a “flavor” of surveying several alternative approaches to motivation, leadership, management style and philosophy, etc. The question is what to do, in terms of student learning, about this perspective of differing perspectives.

Our approach is to attempt to Individualize and personalize student learning as much as possible. We emphasize individualized processing of experiential exercises, our approach reflecting the Hoover definition of experiential learning included in the first part of this paper [4, p. 35]. For example, students in our junior-senior level organizational behavior class are required to write Personal Reaction Papers reacting to each experiential exercise. The following criteria for scoring points reflect our whole-person experiential learning perspective:

1. An integration of the affective and cognitive domains.
2. Good use of assigned cognitive materials.
3. Evidence of an understanding of one’s own feelings, reactions, learnings, etc.
4. Evidence of understanding of the behaviors, feelings, and reactions of others.
5. Concrete examples using classroom and/or “real-world” behaviors.

It was also our goal to incorporate materials into the course which would provide both cognitive and affective stimulation for the learners. In such a spirit, we selected a “textbook” Management of Organizational Behavior Utilizing Human Resources, third edition) [3] to provide the foundation for cognitive learning, an “experiential text” (Organizational Psychology: An Experiential Approach, second edition) [6] to provide the basis for affective learning, and a popular statement from a practitioner (Up the Organization) [7] to provide

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the students with an opportunity to utilize what they had learned both cognitively and affectively with respect to the interpretation of a top level manager's corporate actions.

The largest percentage of class time was devoted to a simultaneous analysis of the texts used for the purpose of cognitive and affective learning. Specifically, we used an inter-active discussion format to consider materials in the text by Hersey and Blanchard [3]. Following discussions of individual units of material in this fashion, we conducted an application-oriented experiential exercise designed to afford the students an opportunity to learn affectively and behaviorally the concepts they had just considered at the cognitive level.

The class participants did not read or analyze the contents of Up the Organization prior to the final two weeks of class. Our intent with this book was for the students to use what they had learned in the course as a frame of reference for considering the acceptability of a practicing manager's suggestions for operating a corporation. As Townsend stated on the cover of his book:

This is not a book about how organizations work. What should happen in organizations and what does happen are two different things, and about as far apart as they can get. This book is about how to get them run three times as well as they do [7]

Thus, through use of the Organization as a "reference document", we believed that the students would be able to identify, from both a cognitive and an affective level, the managerial admonishments which seemed to them to be practical and those which appeared to them to be unworkable either on a wide-scale basis or in these individual frames of reference.

In other words, we hoped to use the Townsend philosophy to tap the differing perspectives perspective. Our intent was to require affective and cognitive processing of the Townsend approach by each individual in the class. Student incentive to become involved in this exercise was enhanced by the fact that an end of course requirement for a passing grade was an acceptable Personal Philosophy Paper:

Through personal synthesis, each student will develop and write his own brief (2-5 pages) personal philosophy paper on the broad topic of organizational behavior. Emphasis will be placed upon the student demonstrating a high level of conceptual understanding and personal growth and learning. There is no "correct" or "preferred" set of conclusions or attitudes (course syllabus).

By the end of the semester, students in our whole-person, organizational behavior class have become quite proficient consumers of the experiential mode. We therefore often try to use their "user perspective" to help us design and implement "end of semester" exercises. With this idea in mind, we assembled a group of four volunteers to help us with what we were calling the "Management Philosophy ala Townsend Exercise". Their challenge was to insure that all class members would read and actively (cognitively and affectively) evaluate the contents of Up the Organization. Also, since this was an end of semester exercise, they were additionally instructed to make the exercise an Integrative one, in that it would tap as many other course concepts and perspectives as possible. Following an investigation and discussion of several different methodologies (including a standard lecture, writing Reaction Papers, etc.), the decision was made to adopt a "game

show" format.

Operationalization of the "Game Show" Format

Prior to the conduct of the game show, the members of the class were told only that a group of students displaying the greatest level of application-oriented knowledge relative to the contents of Up the Organization would receive a prize. Assurances were made that the prize would be one of importance to the students. The actual prize selected (and funded) by the group of volunteers was free dinners for each winning group member for five evenings, with a maximum of \$2.50 per person, per evening.

At the start of the class period for the exercise, all remaining class members were randomly assigned to groups of four. The group of volunteers then indicated that a game show, wherein questions would be asked of all now assembled groups, would determine the winners of the prize. The prize was announced at this point and appeared to be enthusiastically received. To conduct the game show, the contestants were informed that three members of the volunteer group would serve as a panel of judges, while the remaining group member would function as the game show host and would pose the questions.

The questions to be asked, the contestants were informed, would be ones which would require the group members to suggest appropriate managerial responses to various situations described by the host. Further, the contestants were asked to first identify the managerial response which they believed Townsend would initiate and secondly, to suggest the managerial actions they believed to be appropriate in terms of the cognitive and affective learning experiences they had considered and processed so far in the course. While the two managerial responses could be the same, it was clearly explained that variances would probably result rather frequently. The game show host then explained the scoring system to be used during the game show.

After the managerial situation was posed by the game show host, each group submitted their responses (Townsend's and their own). The panel of judges then selected the "best" response they received, i.e., the one they judged to be most appropriate to the situation posed. The selected response could be ala Townsend or one suggested by any contestant group. The host indicated that the panel had spent considerable time studying alternative answers to the situations posed, and thus were qualified as "experts" (it also helped that they were recognized as the better students in the class). Each chosen response was awarded a point, and the team with the most points when the clock ran out was awarded the prize.

The game show was followed by a lively discussion of the results. The contestants were often quite anxious to question the panel on its selections of both situations and "best answers". The judges (and winning team) were happy to explain the reasoning behind their choices, and "losers" were most often quite willing to listen. The Interactive discussion afforded many opportunities for facilitator comments, questions, and clarification as well. In short, high levels of (1) personalized learning, (2) the use of a contingency/situational perspective, (3) cognitive processing, (4) effective reaction, and (5) active behavioral involvement were obtained.

In Closing

The game show format is offered here as an experiential exercise with considerable potential efficacy. First,

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it can be used to “bring alive” the contingency/situational approach which can so often be viewed as too abstract and “dry” by the typical “answer-oriented” undergraduate student. Second, it facilitates the development of an individual’s “personalized” perspective, especially if followed by some type of “personal philosophy” assignment. Third, it is an excellent medium for highlighting and/or combining the content and process dimensions. For example, adopters interested in emphasizing the content dimension can form the teams and explain the contest format a week before actual conduct of the game. Out-of-class team preparation would insure high levels of cognitive information. Adopters more interested in process could increase inter-team competition by using elimination rounds, the right to challenge, variable point systems, etc.

Finally, the game show format is an excellent example of the benefits of whole-person experiential learning. The total learning experience of each participant is highlighted by affective involvement (the thrill of competing, the desire to win, the “owning” of one’s selected response, etc.), as well as the actual game behavior (competing, persuasively communicating, dissonance reduction behaviors during debriefing, etc.).

Most importantly, all of these “process” benefits of experiential learning are not obtained at the expense of cognitive learning. In fact, just the opposite occurs. Concepts covered during the entire course are examined and compared to one another, and the drive to produce the “best answer” requires that extra step beyond simple memorization, i.e., a step into personal understanding. If the experiential learning field is to continue to develop and grow, i.e., be adopted in new ways and in new “areas”, it must continue along this line, i.e., to have stimulating (yes, even fun) structured learning experiences which can be demonstrated to enhance cognitive performance, not just take time away from it.

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