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EXPERIENTIAL VS. TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM APPROACH IN THE BASIC MANAGEMENT COURSE: A PUERTO RICAN EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In the second semester of the academic year 1977-1978 the College of Business Administration of the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus, offered for the first time one experiential section of the basic management undergraduate course.

Palmer and Randolph [1] indicate that experiential learning is based on the premise that concrete experience precedes learning and that the meaning to be derived from any experience comes primarily from the learner himself. Armstrong [2] goes one step further to emphasize the importance of the learning environment in which the learner himself takes responsibility for learning when: setting objectives, finding active learning tasks, obtaining feedback on performance, and applying what was learned. In this sense, the traditional lecture-based course does very little for placing the learning responsibility upon the learner,

Because of the substantial differences between both methods of instruction, consideration was given to comparing the experiential section with a traditional, lecture-based section of the basic management course taught by the same instructor during the same semester. It was hypothesized that the experiential section would attain better grades and gain a more positive perception of the course.

The experiential section was conducted as such during most of the semester. The textbook used provided all the exercises and about 80% of the content material. The regular method of instruction in the conventional section was through lectures given by the instructor and the textbook was a recent edition of a regular basic management text.

Course outlines and required readings for both groups were identical. Moreover, the same examinations were administered to all the sections together outside regular class hours.

The elements taken into consideration in making the comparison were percentages of grade distributions from tests and the students' perception of the instructor, the course and their own performance. A Student Council evaluation provided the information to estimate this latter element.

RESULTS

Grade Distribution

In the experiential section the grade distribution followed a pattern closely approximating a normal distribution, in which 23% obtained As and 35% each received B's and C's.

Additional observations on the grade distribution, using the criterion of students' CPA before entering the course, indicated that in the experiential section only 1/3 of the students had a CPA of 2.5 or better; the corresponding proportion in the conventional section was almost 2/3. Nevertheless, only 82% of the students in the conventional Section with above average CPA's attained B's (there were no A's) as compared to 100% A's and B's for similar GPA's in the experiential section.

Student Council Evaluation

The students in the experiential section gave a more positive evaluation than the conventional group to the course, the instructor, their own performance and their interest in the course, but also perceived their own absenteeism as higher.

Discussion

Expectations of better grades and a more positive perception of the course by students in the experiential section were realized, in spite of what a priori might have been considered as limiting characteristics.

Williams et al. [3] mentioned that culture and past learning experience may affect present expectations and performance of students. This supported results of a rather unsuccessful experiential course taught in Australia. Puerto Rican culture, with its deeply rooted Latin traditions, does not rapidly adopt innovative educational techniques or foster participative learning environments either formally or informally. The students in the experiential section were engaged in this kind of learning experience for the first time and, most likely, were not aware of such techniques before entering the course. Nevertheless, results indicate some Hawthorne effect since the experiential group knew they were a kind of pilot unit for a new learning system. Also, the course instructor had a high regard for experiential learning and therefore her attitude toward this group might be responsible for inducing a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, this study pointed toward achievement within only the content and classroom application dimensions. The development of interpersonal abilities, the transfer to external situations and the perception of own values were not considered or measured.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study has shown that Students in the basic management course can achieve higher grades and a more positive perception of the course when experiential learning techniques are used. Cultural factors, which may have inhibited the participative and responsible learning environment appear to be of no consequence. Moreover, lack of previous similar experience, homogenous backgrounds and high performance records did not affect the experiential group in a negative manner. Nevertheless, the results reported should be analyzed with caution, for the methodology employed did not prevent or limit the influence of possible biasing forces.

REFERENCES

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- [3] Williams, Trevor A., Gary E. Popp and William F. Muhs, "The Use of Semi-autonomous Work Group in Graduate Management Education" 1978 ABSEL Proceedings.