

THE USE OF SEMI-AUTONOMOUS WORK GROUP  
IN GRADUATE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION:  
AN AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In the Mid 1970's an attempt was made to change the organizational structures and the nature of the learning tasks in two undergraduate and one graduate MBA management course. These courses were offered by the Department of Commerce in the University of Western Australia. The change was aimed at moving away from the traditional teacher-student basis of education towards a structure based on groups of students who had as their task the education of themselves, using staff and other resources to accomplish their task.

Traditionally, Australian management education at the university level has followed the British educational system. This educational mode utilizes primarily a more formal lecture approach involving large classes. Lectures are held two hours a week with an additional one hour tutorial session consisting of 10-15 students. Led by a tutor, the group discusses and elaborates concepts covered in the lecture. The tutor is generally not the same staff member who conducts the lecture. Except for the tutorial sessions, little opportunity was provided for student interaction with the instructor. This lack of student instructor interaction includes almost a complete lack of experiential activities that have become commonplace in management education in the United States.

Other differences in the U.S. and Australian management education merit discussion. University education in Australia is limited to those students who rank at the top of their high school class. Selection is determined by a matriculation exam conducted during the final year of a 5 year high school program. These students who qualify for university admission would be approximately 10% of those who graduate from high school. The exam is graded by examiners outside the high school faculty and all students in a given state are given the same matriculation examination.

Although the MBA course to be discussed below was much smaller in size (approximately 30 students) than the undergraduate course described above, the formality of the approach in conducting MBA classes was primarily lecture based. The MBA

courses, unlike the undergraduate courses, were on a 15 week semester basis and generally met twice a week for 1½ hours for the duration of the semester. The students enrolled in the MBA course were educated in the formal undergraduate methods described above and were unaccustomed to class discussions, case discussions, and other more experiential pedagogical methods.

Because much of the MBA courses in organization and management dealt with rapid changes in the environment that were facing Australian organizations, the teaching staff attempted to provide a built-in capacity for change as is necessary in other kinds of organizations. It was felt that this could best be accomplished if students became aware of their own values and purposes and used these to guide their learning behavior.(1)

The purpose of this paper is to outline in detail the aims, methods utilized, and results obtained in the second management course, Organization and Management II, using principles of participative design.(2) Two of the present authors team taught the course during two 15 week semesters in 1975 and 1976.

The re-design of the Organization and Management II entailed moving away from a bureaucratic form of educational organization and towards one which would provide students with greater opportunity to participate in the design of their own learning tasks. Although the bureaucratic model is used most frequently to describe some business and government organizations, it provides in many ways an accurate picture of many educational institutions as well. The teaching staff determines and specifies the content of subjects, the learning tasks that must be performed, the methods of task performance, and criteria for successful task performance.(3)

A participative design approach to the course presented an alternative to the traditional mode. The class is built around primary tasks that are the province and responsibility of groups rather than on the basis of sub-divided tasks and assignment of task fragments to individuals. Participative design of an educational institution requires that the boundaries between disciplines, subjects and so on be re-drawn so that students could recognize more easily the interrelationships between the parts that comprise a field of knowledge. Rather than students moving from one specialist subject to the next, the sources of expertise would be brought to the educational task or goal of the learning group. Taken together, the intended effect of these organizational characteristics is to enlarge and enrich the roles of participants and to improve the quality of the learning that is obtained from the organizational experience. The objective of the course was to experiment with and discover alternate approaches in pedagogy that were more useful in teaching management and organization. Although similar approaches to management education have been attempted many times in the United States, this method of teaching was unique to graduate management education in Australia.

## METHODS UTILIZED

The students in Organization and Management II were in their second semester of the M.B.A. program. They had in the first semester taken Organization and Management I, covering the foundations of Management in the traditional manner. Topics included:

- Evolution of Organization and Management Thought
- Functions of Management
- The Individual in the Organization
- Perception, Communication, Interpersonal Relationships
- Motivation
- Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs
- The Formal Organization
- Groups and Informal Organizations
- Leadership and Management Styles
- Organization Structure
- Organizational Development
- The External Environment

It is important to note that almost all students in the program worked full time and attended classes in the evening after work. Twenty-eight students were enrolled in the course. Since most participants in the MBA program had direct experience in work organizations, it was possible to attempt this learning task in a highly meaningful way. The emphasis was on small groups of participants working on solutions to real problems in their own organizational worlds.

At the beginning of the course the two professors gave lectures that included the basic principles of participative design in organizations (2). In order to acquire some familiarity with the concepts of organizational design, various references and a reading list of management literature was provided.

- | <u>Week</u> | <u>Programme</u>   |
|-------------|--|
| 1.          | Introduction, Orientation lecture and group organization                       |
| 2.          | Futures search (Trends in Australia in the next 10-15 years)                   |
| 3.          | Group meetings--project 1 (single groups)                                      |
| 4.          | Group meetings--project 1 (single groups)                                      |
| 5.          | Group meetings--project 1 (mirror groups)                                      |
| 6.          | Group meetings--project 1 (mirror groups)                                      |
| 7.          | Group reports--project 1 (whole course, plenary session)                       |
| 8.          | Group reports--project 1 (whole course, plenary session)                       |
| 9.          | Design insights--lectures and summary of work done to this point in the course |
| 10.         | Group meetings--project 2 (single groups)                                      |
| 11.         | Group meetings--project 2 (mirror groups)                                      |
| 12.         | Group meetings--project 2 (mirror groups)                                      |

13. Group reports--project 2 (whole course, plenary session)
14. Group reports--project 2 (whole course, plenary session)
15. Design insights, summary, review, and implications for organizations in the future

After a review of concepts in Organization and Management I and a conceptual lecture concerning job design and participative design in the first session, a futures search led by the two team lecturers was conducted, utilizing class members as resources in estimating major issues, crises, and values emergent in Australia and the world in the next 10-15 years as they concerned organizations.

Four groups of seven members were suggested by the staff based primarily on similar occupations as well as the personalities involved. The latter guideline for group membership was based on disbursing among the groups strong informal leaders which were identified by the one of the instructors in Organization and Management I. The individual groups then met for a few sessions to discuss and agree on a specific organization problem, taken from work experiences of individual group members. In selecting organizational problems for analysis, the only general constraint was that the problem had to include employees of the organization. In other words, the problems selected should not be of a "purely technical" nature calling only for specialist expertise in such areas as engineering or financial analysis.

Each group met to select its problem, make a preliminary analysis of the problem, and develop tentative solutions. Then the groups were paired. The point of doing this was that the groups were in a position to help each other in making further progress towards their solutions. Thus, each "mirror group" (pair of groups) was dealing with two problems. One of these problems was designated "project 1" and the other "project 2". When project 1 had been tackled, the groups reported to the whole course which was then asked to make critical comment and provide assistance to improve the solutions further. Then the mirror groups moved on to project 2 and the process was repeated. Perhaps the most effective strategy for problem-solving in mirror groups was as follows. One group presented its problem and tentative solution. The other group listened and tried to help to improve the design. To insure interest and participation by the mirror group, they were required to outline the primary groups problem(s) analyses, and solutions to the whole class when they met in plenary session. In round two the roles of the two groups were reversed.

### Role of Staff

The roles of staff were as facilitators. They attempted to help the groups in opening up lines of discussion, but did

not define the learning objectives of the groups. The teaching staff also provided feedback about performance. This was accomplished easiest in the plenary (reporting-back) sessions. The mirror groups provided some feedback at earlier stages in the process. The other dimension of staff roles concerned assessment. Assessment was based one half on performance during the semester and one half on a final examination.

Because participants spent most of their time working on selected tasks in groups, assessment of individuals by staff was difficult. Therefore, the staff suggested a grade which could be assigned to the project of each group, and consulted with the group to determine the allocation of grades among individual members of the group. Both parts of the assessment were directed towards evaluating student performance with respect to the learning tasks which participants actually attempted.

During the semester the staff were called upon individually to give guidance to the groups and give lectures on specific topics. Some of these requests included lectures on diffusion of job design principles throughout an organization, specific implementation guidelines, and examples of successful job design projects and organizational development programs in industry and government organizations. At one point an outside industrial management consultant gave a guest lecture, which included a question and answer period, to the class that involved the successful implementation of an organizational redesign based on the principles of participative design.

## RESULTS

Initially, some students reacted in a confused and frustrated manner to the design of the course. There were consistent requests made to the lecturers by some students to outline in more detail what was expected of the students and specific methods by which to proceed. The instructors attempted to respond to the student requests, but refrained from giving specific procedures in defining problems and solutions for the group members. Two major complaints by students were:

1. Lack of staff direction at the beginning of the course. Some confusion existed among students as to what was expected of them. The functions of the primary and mirror group were also misunderstood by some.
2. Composition of the assigned groups were criticized. Some students reported that the selected problems of the group may have not been widely shared by all group members. Additionally, some students questioned whether occupational similarity was a useful guide in group composition.

Several trends were noted by the instructors during the course of Organization and Management II. The freedom given to students in planning their own educational tasks resulted in confusion and ambiguous feelings on the part of the class. These disturbing elements ebbed, as time progressed, and as students became more comfortable with the class structure.

One interesting point that resulted was the students' questioning of instructors teaching other courses in the MBA program as to why their course was not taught in the same manner. At times, the reaction of the other instructors made life uncomfortable for the Organization and Management II lecturers. At one point, a meeting of the faculty of Economics and Commerce was called and the two instructors were asked to explain the teaching method to other instructors in the faculty.

An additional insight results from observing the behavior of students in primary groups, mirror group situations, and the plenary groups. It appeared that while some class members who were very active in the smaller groups became reticent in presenting their views in the plenary sessions. Likewise, those most active in the plenary sessions did not participate as much as other group members in the smaller meetings. It appeared that this particular teaching methodology allowed each student to contribute in an atmosphere most comfortable to them. This flexibility was deemed desirable to include participation by most members of the class.

The method of instruction described above was attempted by one of the authors in an advanced undergraduate class in the United States. The results obtained were unsatisfactory according to the majority of the class and also in the opinion of the instructor. Only those few older class members with organizational experience responded favorable. Generally, the younger class members without work experience in organizations wanted more direction and guidance.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Clearly, the results obtained would indicate selected usage of the methodology. In the author's opinion, two factors are likely to influence the success of this pedagogy.

1. A strong foundation in the basic concepts of organization and management is necessary.
2. Prior work experience in organizations is extremely beneficial. It would seem unwise to utilize this method on the typical student age group of 18-22 years with little practical experience.

At some point the problem of interfacing with other courses in the program must be faced. The diversity of teaching styles appears to result in some confusion in the students and possibly hostile reactions from colleagues teaching other courses in the program. Obviously, some courses require and are best taught in a more traditional fashion. This would seem to indicate a more integrative approach involving the faculty teaching in a given program. Obviously, this task is more easily described than achieved. It would also seem inappropriate to assume that the teaching method discussed can only be useful in Organization and Management courses. The applicability of this method may be appropriate to other business disciplines after students are given a sound foundation in a given subject area.

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It is interesting as well as important to note that methodologies used in one country may have different results when utilized in another culture. The distinct differences in the English-Australian system as compared with the United States can cause unanticipated consequences. Perhaps more than we realize, past learning experiences affect present expectations and performance of students.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A rather open-ended teaching methodology was attempted in a graduate Organization and Management course in Australia. It was hoped that the students would gain a more “real-life” experience in solving organizational problems. Besides obtaining knowledge, students hopefully developed their ability to learn on their own, think logically, and present their ideas to others who had direct interaction in the problem solving process.

Based on student feedback, the methodology was partially successful but not without some unexpected results. The fairly high degree of initial student anxiety appears to be related to past educational experiences and future expectations that are more unique to higher education in Australia. The introduction of this method was questioned by other faculty members who utilized more traditional methods.

While experiential and other innovative techniques are well known in the United States, little is known about their effectiveness in other cultures. A number of important variables may affect the successful introduction of these newer methods. Management education, graduate as well as undergraduate, has been dominated by methods and teaching materials from the United States. It is the authors opinion that research is needed concerning their application in other cultures. Certainly, the opportunities are extensive for research in this area.

### REFERENCES

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