

Business Games and Experiential Learning in Action, Volume 2, 1975
THE FUTURE POTENTIAL OF STRUCTURED LEARNING EXERCISES

Robert H. Dougherty

Central Michigan University

Structured learning exercises may be defined as simulations designed to serve as a basis for learning how people behave in organizations. Behavioral implications of the actions of group members are reflected upon either as a point of entry into the study of theory or as an opportunity to apply theory already learned. The instructional emphasis is on acquiring behavioral rather than technical or purely conceptual skills. Structured learning exercises in this context are not computer based or machine dependent.

This paper focuses on the future of structured learning exercises on three levels: 1) the roots, strengths and possible weaknesses that are inherent in structured learning exercises because of its derivative association with the training laboratory; 2) the kinds of change that educational institutions may experience because of the impact of structured learning exercises on teaching methodologies; 3) specific areas in which structured learning exercises need to be developed.

ROOTS AND FUTURE

Before considering the potential of structured learning exercises, a look backwards toward their roots in the Training Laboratory is illuminating. Bradford, Gibb and Benne define the training laboratory as 'a community dedicated to the stimulation and support of experimental learning and change.' [2, p. 3] These same authors describe the training laboratory as a place where 'new patterns of behavior are invented and tested in a climate supporting change and protected for the time from the full practical consequences of innovative action in ongoing associational life outside the laboratory. [2, p. 3] The training laboratory provides the setting? or climate in which other more specific learning procedures are utilized such as the training group (t-group), information or theory sessions and focused exercises. [5, pp. 14-15]

The t-group is defined as an unstructured group meeting where participants examine their interpersonal relationships, where the group becomes the focus of inquiry and where the group, by reflecting on data generated by themselves, tries to understand dynamics of group behavior, e.g., decision making processes, leadership, norms and rules. [1, pp. 150-151] Much support was given by Industry and Education to T-group methods of learning during the 1960's. However, the T-group was not without its liabilities. The T-group was attacked for fostering

Business Games and Experiential Learning in Action, Volume 2, 1975

a false sense of reality that taught inappropriate behaviors for real life situations. The lack of sufficiently qualified and trained group leaders was noted. Ethical problems emerged from the difficulty of selecting T-group candidates and separating T-group sessions from therapy sessions. Industry's attitude toward the laboratory movement has cooled in the 1970's for these and other reasons.

Not to be overlooked in the flurry of activity that surrounded the Laboratory movement is that learning technique of the training laboratory referred to as the focused exercise. The focused exercise presented a definite structured task to be performed by the group members. It was not "free form" as the T-group was. In training laboratory language this group was called the Action group (A-group). The author, reporting on research completed in 1969 on sensitivity training and industry wrote, "future designs of training laboratories will reserve larger amounts of time for A-group exercises because these exercises might more readily be shaped to simulate on-the-job problems, and the skills learned in solving these problems are more easily transferred to real situations."

The structured learning exercise is an outgrowth of the focused exercise of the training laboratory. The structured learning exercise may well surpass and outlive the T-group as a training tool for managers. The benefits that the T-group enjoyed in terms of the experiential nature of the learning process are retained in the structured learning without the critical liabilities of the T-group. The best of the laboratory movement is gleaned for the purpose of training people in behavioral skills while many of the pitfalls of the training laboratory are avoided. The organization behavior course becomes the place where the students, aided by a trained leader and appropriate theory, reflect on data generated by themselves, in an effort to understand the dynamisms of group behavior. To the extent that the liabilities of the T-group do apply to structured learning exercises, e.g., the lack of trained and qualified instructors and of research to continue the process of theory building and to test effectiveness, the future dangers of this type of experiential learning are already clearly marked.

STRUCTURED LEARNING EXERCISES AND CHANCE

Understood properly, the use of structured learning exercises for training students in interpersonal skills, integrating theory and practice with a strong emphasis on application amounts to a new teaching technology. The implications of this teaching technology can be profound for the future, effecting change in important aspects of the educational institution.*

* For literature describing the possible effects of changes in Technology on other aspects of an organization confer [4, p. 914; and 3, p. 1145].

Business Games and Experiential Learning in Action, Volume 2, 1975

Structural Changes

Design of physical learning space to provide surroundings appropriate to this non-traditional teaching approach is a worthy challenge. The breaking down of passive learning habits is hindered by the traditional classroom. Different settings facilitate change in the learning process.

The value of simulations as teaching devices will lead to the setting up of learning programs that more closely approximate real working situations. Despite administrative problems, internship programs will multiply and prosper.

Curricular structures will be revamped to allow more experiential training in those comprehensive courses that seek to integrate conceptual, technical, and behavioral skills. The value of data generated by some experiential exercises would be increased by feedback from experts in various related disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and political science, thus paving the way for more cross-utilization of faculty resources.

Task Changes

The possibility of building skills in applying behavioral theory in addition to the usual goal of learning behavioral theory will lead to a broadening of the generally accepted task of education. The student demand for task-relevant training in addition to declining student enrollments makes more experimentation in experiential learning attractive.

NEED FOR ADDITIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN STRUCTURED LEARNING EXERCISES

There is a need for much more imaginative and creative work in developing structured learning exercises. A wide selection of exercises should be available to instructors to accommodate different instructional time spans, varying in length from one hour to a full semester. Different models and their effectiveness ratings are needed. This projected development includes the notion of a series of sequenced exercises with corresponding theory, each section acting as a building block for the next. Instead of various exercises standing like separate beads, each would be part of a clearly conceived overall plan replete with well defined behavioral objectives.

In the area of organization behavior the same topics or units of study generally appear. In addition to units on communication, perception, leadership, conflict and change, others are needed that reflect more recent areas of development. A unit, for example, on the dynamics of retrenchment would be helpful.

Business Games and Experiential Learning in Action, Volume 2, 1975

One of the criticisms leveled against the T-group is that group sessions can generate more data than can be processed effectively by the group and its leader. The wealth of data forthcoming for analysis is one of the strengths of the structured exercise, however, as in the T-group, there can be an overload of material to be sifted and insufficient time to do the sifting. This creates a huge log of unfinished business. More work needs to be done on regulating the amount of learning material generated by an exercise so that it is consonant with time limitations. More theory is needed for instructors on the relative influence of more or less structure on the participants of group exercises. The manipulation of important exercise variables needs to be made explicit in terms of projected effects. Much work remains to be done in this area.

Many exercises can be set up without props. With paper many more can be constructed inexpensively. There is a need for three dimensional materials that are inexpensive and reusable so that instructors can build a stockpile of materials for their laboratory equipment. These props assist the “doing” phase of the exercise and ought to provide tasks ranging from the routine to the creative.

Conclusion

As might be expected, practice has far outstripped research in the use of structured learning exercises. The cry for research has echoed and re-echoed and has not been treated at length in this paper despite its obvious importance. Experiential learning has a vast untapped potential for growth. The crest of its wave is still on the horizon. Its many implications for the future are elusive but visible enough to stir excitement among its practitioners.

REFERENCES

1. Bennis, Warren C., “A New Role for Behavioral Sciences: Effecting Organizational Change,” Administrative Science Quarterly, VIII (Sept., 1963), pp. 125-165.
2. Bradford, Leland P., J. R. Gibb and K. D. Benne, T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method, (New York: Wiley, 1964).
3. Leavitt, Harold J., “Applied Organizational Change in Industry: Structural, Technological, and Humanistic Approaches,” in James G. March, ed., Handbook of Organizations. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), pp. 1144-1170.
4. Perrow, Charles, “Hospitals: Technology, Structure, and Goals,” in James G. March, ed., Handbook of Organizations, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), pp. 910-971.

Business Games and Experiential Learning in Action, Volume 2, 1975

5. Schein, Edgar H. and Warren C. Bennis, *Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods: The Laboratory Approach*, (New York: Wiley, 1965).