

MOVEMENT TOWARD INCREASED STUDENT ROLES IN THE DESIGN OF EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds upon an idea suggested last year in the Gentry and McGinnis paper, that we should have students co-produce experiential exercises. We made a somewhat tentative attempt to do so, in the context of a culture-learning experience. While the exercise was seen as generally successful by the instructor, problems are noted as well.

INTRODUCTION

Gentry and McGinnis (2008) suggested that one way to motivate students is to get them more actively involved in determining the structure of the course. In specific, the second author discussed the extended role play Bafa Bafa (Shirts 1977) and suggested that students could be co-producers of a similar role play. As someone listening to this presentation, I found the idea intriguing and decided to attempt to implement this idea.

THE LOGIC FOR CO-PRODUCTION

Gentry and McGinnis (2008) offered Deci and Ryan's (1991; Ryan and Deci 2000) Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical basis for arguing for having students co-produce their learning processes. That theory suggests that when the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are provided, people will try to attain mastery, be more motivated, and be more spontaneously interested, maybe even curious. Autonomy relates to the notion of volition. If students feel the activity in which they participate is self-driven, they are more likely to achieve intrinsic motivation. If students feel a sense of being able to perform the activity in a successful yet challenging atmosphere, their interest will be maintained and intrinsic motivation kindled. If students know their peers or relevant social groups value something, they too will value it, which is known as relatedness. Knowing this, we should do a better job of creating simulations and role plays that are more self-driven and co-produced, where students are allowed to develop competence, and be involved in activities that are valued or at least shared by their peers.

To establish volition and competence, simulations and exercises that allow more student choice is a start. Though we as academicians often scoff at the chance to allow students to

dictate or least help produce course content, the experience could be beneficial to normally uninterested or disengaged students. To begin, exercises that focus on negotiation and developing negotiation skills not only make students aware of unethical behavior and market governance structures, but also foster competence through critical thinking especially when the object of negotiation is important to the student. Page and Mukherjee (2006), for example, did this through their focus on negotiations that are of personal value to the students, such as a major purchase, a romantic relationship, or work-related relationship. In preparing for the negotiation, for which they must later discuss in writing (a competence-enhancing skill), the students must prepare goals, strategies, and expectations, and examine the scenario from the other person's perspective. These simulations and exercises personalize the activity, make the students think from the other negotiator's perspective, and allow the students to see the many different possibilities that will exist for them in the workplace. Most importantly, the choice flexibility and the personal relevance of the negotiation topic enhance volition. Shami et al. (2004) run a similar volitional and competence-building task through the use of their Island Telecom simulation in which students are allowed to choose roles in the company, the government, or the media. The ethical dilemmas the students face are fictional, but are handled with passion and, because the ethics in questions are handled with other students rather than the instructor, students are likely to feel more involvement and more control over the simulation.

As stated by Bendapudi and Leone (2003), co-production has been used by marketers for a long time (e.g., grocery stores allowing customers to scan and bag their own groceries and photography stores allowing customers to reproduce, crop, and enlarge pictures). The service-exchange perspective, upon which co-production is based, is focused on creating relationships. It is gaining momentum in marketing and marketing education and replacing the goods-oriented perspective as being fundamental to economic exchange (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Co-production works not necessarily because it frees time and costs from a production standpoint, but because a person assigns responsibility for co-produced items (Bendapudi and Leone 2003). Co-production also creates greater satisfaction because the person helping to produce or perform a function gets to see how his or her task or creation contributes to the overall process (Hackman and Oldham 1976).

THE FIRST CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE EXERCISE

We first considered modifying the Bafa Bafa exercise. The intention was to provide a brief description of the two cultures, so that the student could get a general picture of the nature of the expected exercise. Below are descriptions of the two cultures in the existing BaFa BaFa framework:

ALPHA CULTURE.

This is a very collective society. Women are protected. They are not to initiate conversations, and strangers are not to talk to them, unless introduced first by an Alpha male. One should not initiate a conversation with someone from Alpha but should wait to be incorporated into the conversation by an Alpha male. Conversations should be high context, discussing family, especially male members. Visitors not following the social norms (even though they are not explicitly known) are asked to leave the culture.

BETA CULTURE.

This is an extremely individualistic trading culture. The language (BaFa BaFa) is extremely low context, as it is designed to convey the type of cards one wants in a trade. All interactions in the culture involve the trading of cards in the attempt to get a complete set in one color. No other language besides BaFa BaFa is allowed. No gender differences are structured into the culture per se. While there is no explicit incentive for winning (completing the most sets), competition often becomes quite cutthroat and tourists are frequently taken advantage of.

EXERCISE PROCEDURE.

The class is split into two groups (Alpha and Beta). They learn the culture and practice it, and then send a couple of members to the other culture to observe its play. They return and talk about what they observed. Then members of each culture visit the other culture and attempt to join into their activities. After a few minutes, they return home and there is a discussion of the other culture. This last process is repeated a few times, and then the class recombines and the two cultures try to figure each other out, with a few hints provided by the instructor.

FIRST MODIFICATION CONSIDERED.

After covering culture in lectures, the class would be broken into eight or so groups. Each group would simulate the culture of a particular country (using English instead of the country's own language) by developing a script of the unspoken rules guiding its operations. The groups would develop the script based on interviews with international students, personal experience, and a thorough search of available sources. The group's reports would be graded by the instructor, and the two lending themselves the best to use in role plays would be selected for a role play. The group members would demonstrate their cultures and the other class members would attempt to name the country being simulated. Bonus points would go to the groups chosen to demonstrate the culture and those class members identifying the

demonstrated cultures correctly. To improve the class' ability to evaluate which cultures are being demonstrated, students could be asked to learn about the range of cultures covered in the project.

ACTUAL APPROACH TAKEN.

We chose not to attempt this potential alternative, as the instructor involved deemed that it would not fit well in the general structure of his class. The class had already been divided into groups of three or four based on their interest in particular countries; shifting their attention to a second country which might better fit the circumstances of this task (in terms of having different interactional structures) might provide even more opportunity to learn about other cultures, but at the same time there is a high likelihood that the students would be spread too thin in terms of getting a meaningful understanding of their primary country. One problem with having the students develop a cultural script is that most of the countries selected for the other projects are fairly similar to the US (the UK, Australia, Canada, etc.); the lack of uniqueness would not provide much opportunity for creating a "different" experience for the students nor make for interesting reading for the grader.

A second concern expressed by the instructor was that it might end in a dreadful failure if the students could not capture sufficient variance to make the cultural differences easily observable. The instructor had previously developed a simulation exercise which tried to introduce students to the information-gathering processes provided by trade shows, but which developed into the signing of contracts despite admonitions in the instructions not to do so. Given that the exercise failed to teach what it was designed to, the instructor decided to be more cautious in this endeavor.

THE TENTATIVE STEP TAKEN

The decision was made to investigate if the students could use the Bafa Bafa experience as a stimulus to explore the implications of culture for business interactions in their country. The class assignment is as follows:

On date, the class will play the BaFa BaFa game, which involves the interactions between two distinct cultures. Your group is to develop guidelines for others' expectations if they were to visit your country as tourists, including how to greet, who can speak to whom, personal space, taboo topics not to discuss, topics that will break the ice, how soon you can get down to business, etc. Explain how and why there are differences between these processes in your country and those in the US. This report is worth 100 points [out of 1000 total in the course].

Hint: Read the instructions for the next project. Conduct interviews early and obtain insight on the issues involved in this project to include in this report.

THE PROJECT OUTCOME

We obtained no measures of the perceived learning on the part of the students. However, the instructor has used the BaFa

BaFa game numerous times before and has graded a wide range of international marketing projects over the last 20 years. Thus, the evaluations of the performance of the exercise and the subsequent written projects are based on his personal observations.

THE BAFa BAFa EXPERIENCE.

Shirts' (1977) game has been discussed previously at numerous ABSEL Conferences. For the most part, the role play went as expected. Students in the Alpha group faced much discomfort in standing close to one another and touching each other frequently, as directed by the instructions. A personal space of roughly two feet was not a learned behavior that was easy to overcome. As the hour of role play progressed, though, the students were able to perform this facet of the role play more effectively. Similarly, Alphans were to ignore visiting Betans who did follow the rules of the Alphan culture. They were able to do so, with some encouragement, and, in fact, the second group of participating tourists from Beta felt so ignored that three of the five visitors ended up trading Beta cards by themselves just outside a group of interacting Alphans. The instructor had not seen such behavior in any of his previous experiences with the role play. In the debriefing session, he likened the behavior to tourists in Paris choosing to dine at McDonalds and thus to forego the opportunity to sample some of the best food that the world has to offer. Future Alphans will be told to banish visitors performing such offensive acts in their culture.

The Beta culture performed much as it had in previous experiences. Betans were extremely competitive and piled up many completed sets of cards. Alphan tourists, who were allocated some relatively rare numbered cards, were taken advantage of, as had been experienced previously. This provided a teaching moment in the debriefing to discuss the price discrimination that tourists face, especially in cab fares. One unusual event occurred when one female told the PhD student administering the Beta culture that she didn't understand why they had to do this. [Yes, not all students want to participate in role plays.] The PhD student used this as a teaching moment to note the obvious, that she had the opportunity to "experience" a new culture. Whether that resonated with the young woman is unclear, but apparently the point was understood by the rest of the Betans.

THE WRITTEN PROJECT.

The instructor was somewhat skeptical as to what he would find in the written projects, but in general was quite pleased. The biggest criticisms were those that could be associated with any project: the failure to document sources well and writing problems. The content of the projects on entering the UK, Italian, Austrian, Japanese, Chinese, Danish, Nicaraguan, Canadian, Irish, French, and Brazilian cultures were judged to be quite good. In fact, though he has travelled to most of these countries, he learned new insights.

The point of the BaFa BaFa role play is to demonstrate how uncomfortable one can be in another culture when one doesn't understand the implicit rules of conduct. The written projects mentioned frequently the need to do one's homework prior to crossing borders. Further, several projects noted that this need

was especially great for Americans, due to our extreme ethnocentrism. This point had been raised in lectures, but its discussion in the projects seemed to go beyond "platitude" to strong belief. Thus, the written project appeared to serve its purpose well.

At the same time, the difficulty that some student groups had in finding unique behaviors that one would encounter indicate that replacing the Alpha and Beta cultures of BaFa BaFa with representations of some real cultures would not create the discomfort needed to shake the students' trees sufficiently to create the strong belief that one needs to do one's cultural homework prior to making business trips abroad.

DISCUSSION

Some critics of co-production may contend that a drawback of this approach is that the instructor loses control over the content and processes involved in the simulation/ exercise. However, as with co-production in mainstream marketing, parameters can be put into place so that the amount of co-production is limited. For example, in the previous simulation on dealing with foreign ethics, students could still deal with a set of ethical dilemmas and questions, but also have the option of deciding for themselves where they would like the simulation/exercise to take place, thus allowing for them to research the different ethical codes, standards, and norms that are indigenous to each culture. In this fashion, they are not only working with a real (as opposed to a fictional country) but also learning cultural elements about a society in which they are genuinely interested.

Another potential drawback educators may see is that students may perceive that they are doing the work rather than the instructor. Because co-produced items assign responsibility and involve both the producer and the consumer, the instructor is still involved in administering the exercise. Depending on the quality of the student inputs, the instructor may need to provide extensive input in order to assure some accuracy to the representation of the cultural dimensions and values.

Though we at ABSEL have focused much on innovative delivery techniques, perhaps what we need is more incorporation of student views into the design and development of methods that conform to the way that modern students learn. Students today have at their disposal more technology, more information, and more ways to gather and integrate information than ever before. Often we become obsessed that our way of learning "back in the day" (to use today's youth-oriented vernacular) was the best and that we learned things more deeply. Has the human mind changed in the last few decades? Has the scope of what is to be learned been broadened that greatly? Getting educators to learn the technology and to use it in ways that students learn and become inspired are musts, and ABSELers, for the most part, have jumped on board with some of the ways students prefer to learn with the latest technology and techniques. Sometimes our greatest learning simulations and exercises result when the students get a chance to teach or co-produce the simulation or learning experience because it increases volition and responsibility.

One last conclusion worth noting is that the use of an experiential exercise needs to fit the instructor's course structure. Given the series of individual and group projects used in the

International Marketing course discussed in this paper, a co-produced culture-introduction exercise was judged to be inappropriate. However, if students are not already embedded in learning about another specific culture, the development of a set of “cultural rules” to describe interactions in some parts of the world may well generate the desired outcome as well as higher levels of student involvement. However, a selection of Canada as the stimulus could result in the confirmation of ethnocentric perspectives, which would be a travesty given the task’s mission.

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