

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 18, 1991

PRACTICING WHAT WAS PREACHED: A SEQUENTIAL LEARNING MODEL PUT TO THE TEST

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ABSTRACT

The value of a sequential learning model--composed of an experiential class followed by a field project class--is presented and evaluated. The article provides the rationale for such a course design, together with the actual characteristics of the courses and the teaching methodology utilized. The success rates of students enrolled in this sequential model are discussed, with suggestions for future class designs.

INTRODUCTION

Some thirty years ago, as I left my first college class, I wanted to find out how to "practice what had been preached," or how to apply the theory I was learning in the classroom. I find that many of my current junior and senior level students are also impatient to try out their academic wings, and are not satisfied with the answer, "you'll have to wait until you are a manager to try out the ideas and theories that you have learned in college." There has been some progress toward my goal of being able to practice what was preached, but just how far have we come?

My experiences with a "sequential learning model, "--an experiential class followed by a field project class--can provide some answers to this question. This model is best described as (a) simulated classroom learning to understand how a consultant functions, followed by (b) a field project class made up of teams of students who are assigned to a company to use their newly learned consulting skills--to help improve the quality of work life or the productivity of employees of this firm.

RATIONALE FOR THE MODEL

My goal for this model was twofold (a) to enhance the classroom learning in a typical academic discipline, and (b) to assist my students in the acquisition of cognitive skills--of a change agent; two of the objectives of experiential education as mentioned by S. Cohen and C. A. Sovet (1989). As David Kolb (1986) et al, state, teachers can no longer be just dispensers of knowledge and wisdom, but must take on a new role as facilitators of learning who encourage their students to learn from their own experiences in life, e.g. outside the classroom, in field project settings.

Neither experiential learning nor field projects are new learning concepts, and they have been used in a variety of settings. For example, over a decade ago the "Pro-Am" Plan gave college seniors in a public relations curriculum the needed professional experience by assigning them to work with professionals in a nearby city, (A. Walker, 1979) or at Berea College, where work-based experiential education has led to more integrated combinations of academic learning and work (W. A. Laramie & P. v. spears, 1978). The most common "field-experience" model, however, has been to assign students to a firm to observe management practices and then to write a paper comparing these to the theory taught in the classroom, like those described by S. H. Akabas (1978) where students were placed in corporations to observe unions and management and then they

determined the value of social work skills in this environment.

Seldom, however, have students been taught the skills of a change agent, and then been given the chance to actually interact with managers and workers to *solve a work related problem* which could affect the profit-ability or productivity of the firm. Reasons for not using this type of field project class might include (a) the inordinate amount of time the professor must give to develop a working relationship with several area employers, who are willing to allow students to use their organization as a laboratory for learning; (b) the varying skill levels of students in each team; and (c) the potential for project failure which would reflect negatively on the professor and the university. Fortunately, this author has had four years of success with businesses in the community, and those positive experiences have allowed him to gain access to new companies to permit further student field projects.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to a discussion of several issues (a) the stimulus for a "sequential classroom" model; (b) the actual design of this "sequential model;" (c) the actual knowledge gained by students enrolled in these two classes; and finally, (d) suggestions for the design of future classes.

THE MAIN ISSUES OF THE SEQUENTIAL MODEL

The stimulus for the "sequential" classroom model

Changes of this magnitude that require complete revision of curricula do not happen by chance; a strong disequilibrium has to exist. Within our School of Business Administration, the "personnel concentration" was shrinking in size while the other concentrations, such as accounting and marketing, were growing, prompting our Dean to suggest that we consider dropping the personnel concentration. Additionally, graduates of the Personnel Concentration were having difficulty finding jobs--employers in our area were not actively recruiting personnel students.

The chief executives who met to discuss the personnel concentration problem insisted that they needed people with the skills of human resource managers, who knew how to help with needed organizational changes. These board members suggested a stronger series of classes in the concentration to train students how to facilitate change, and how to deal with the increasingly complex issues which were surfacing in the personnel area.

My continued work with several of the board members, soliciting ideas regarding the kinds of skills students should possess, provided several major conclusions. First, they were all convinced that the skills of a change agent were at the top of the list. The second priority area --improving both employee productivity, and well-being--was more difficult to describe. Their suggestions led to the design and creation of two new classes described in this paper (a) Organization Development & Change and (b) Improving Productivity and the Quality of Work Life.

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The Design of the “sequential” model

I wish I could say that I took advantage of the work of the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (34. T. Keeton, 1978), but I didn't even know of ABSEL in 1985. I had, however, during my doctoral studies in 1978, stumbled across an article by S. Morton Altman titled, “Reality Classrooms: Field Experience and Undergraduate Education,” which appealed to my interest and had stuck in my mind. I again located the article, reread it, and it became the stimulus for my work.

Actual work began in 1985 to create the first course of the two-sequence experiential/field project model. To be effective, however, the model had to include principles common to a competency-based business school curricula similar to those proposed by D. A. Kolb (1984), such as: divergence, assimilation, convergence, and implementation. An understanding of these were important, but it was the guiding principles of Ronald R. Sims and William I. Sauser (1985)--high tolerance for eclecticism, an emphasis on both theory and practice, direct experience, relevant assessment, useful feedback, increased self knowledge, and reflection and consolidation---that proved to be essential to the success of this new sequential model. Before discussing this phase of the development process, however, it is important to acknowledge a potential threat, which could face any professor who might introduce such an sequential teaching methodology.

The “Catch 22” in the Sequential Model.

The members of the boards of visitors with whom I worked kept reminding me to think seriously about the time commitment of such a model, as too much of the reward system of most universities was built around a publishing based model, not one where a faculty member's time, devoted to experiential teaching, could be easily measured or rewarded. Pamela J. Tate (1983) made a strong point to support this problem of shortage of time when she argued that new measurement techniques and program models were needed in experiential learning in order to save money and faculty time, while preserving individualization in education. Unfortunately, the individualized mode of experiential learning which differentiates it most from the traditional information assimilation mode, played the most havoc with this instructor's time.

I couldn't teach, serve on committees, and publish, so I made the decision to stop publishing. I chose to take the risk of introducing a rather time-consuming sequential learning model, rather than publish, because I believed that the students would learn more, and ultimately have better skills after graduation.

The First Sequential Class: organization Development & Chance

The first class, BA 454, was designed using the eight (B) principles of Sims and Sauser (1985) and taught students how a consultant, or change agent, functioned, using a very (1) eclectic, and experiential design, is. it was individualized for each student--using a psychological contract, so that each one could experience the reality of working through the eight stage “action research or organization change model” (F. Friedlander & L. D. Brown, 1974), Students were rated in four ways (a) each week discussion quizzes (25% of the grade) are led by a student, who must explain how the concept in question can be applied in a business setting; (b) at the conclusion of each Thursdays simulation lab each

student must use a four part form to evaluate their colleagues (25% of the grade), on the degree of exercise preparedness that each of their group members brought to the session. A perfect score in any of the four parts requires a -twenty-five-word justification for that part, to get students used to the idea of “rewarding people for effectiveness rather than for popularity.” (C) Change critique (CC) papers (25% of the grade) are submitted and graded weekly by the instructor. Each CC explains the application of the theory in a work setting and the feelings experienced during the Thursday simulations; and (d) The final oral examination (25% of the grade) tests their ability as a consulting group to satisfy the instructor/client.

This course demands that student's [2] practice the theory discussed in the textbook and that they actively participate in experiential exercises, thus, [3] they experience the feelings of being a facilitator during one of the assigned simulations. [4] Relevant assessment is given each week by both the professor and those who have been participants, in the exercises or discussions, and useful, [5] solicited feedback is requested and provided. All during the course an emphasize is placed on soliciting evaluative feedback and giving genuine, earned praise to those who deserve it--so often lacking in the work world. Naturally, as each week progresses toward the end of the course, students begin to increase their [6] self-knowledge of what it feels like to be in the role of the facilitator. They [7] reflect more on their own prior attitudes about behavior change, as they learn from their own experiences--during each simulation. The last principle, [8] consolidation, becomes apparent during the final, oral examination.

Here, teams of students draw a number--one of the stages of the action research model--and act as the consulting team to the client/the professor, to deal with all the appropriate issues in two stages of the eight stage organization change model. Feedback, at this point, is quite fulfilling for those who do well. For others, who omit certain key points, it serves as a dramatic learning experience. Each team is rated by the professor using a twelve (12) part form that rates everything from cooperation among teams members, and equalization of the work load, to whether the correct strategy was used for this stage of the organization change model. Seldom does any team score below a “B+” in this examination, but even this high score has been seen poorly, because of the weekly evaluative feedback given by the professor and the knowledge that this test was a sample of what to expect in the next semester's field project.

Another unique opportunity for feedback, in addition to the weekly evaluation as leader/facilitator, comes from the professor. Each student must submit to the professor a weekly, two page (typed) change critique paper describing their reactions during the simulation. The first page requires an analysis of the theoretical concept and how they relate to each student's work experiences (how the theory was applied). They must tell the professor how an understanding of the theory could have helped them do a better job in a current or past job situation. The second page asks for reactions, feeling and observations during the simulation. They must tell the professor how they felt during the simulation as their classmates and the professor put them on the spot, i.e. how they felt about the attitudes and behavior of their colleagues. The ongoing, weekly dialogue between professor and student helps them understand the eight stages of the model, in preparation for the next class, where they will have to be the consultant and act appropriately in that role.

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The Second Sequential Class: Improving Productivity and the Quality of Work Life (BA 457)

Teaching and learning techniques change markedly in this class. While tests and classroom discussion are still utilized, the emphasis for ones grade changes. Now, students must submit a twelve (12) part proposal (5% of the grade) to the company executive and managers with whom they will work, describing their activities and the costs associated with needed resources. In addition, they submit to the professor and their management team, including the CEO, a weekly planning and accomplishment (P&A) report (15% of the grade) which identifies progress toward each week's goal, next weeks goal(s) and any obstacles they are encountering.

Most managers find that setting realistic goals with achievable action plans is a formidable task, so they are impressed when students submit these kind of reports. This exercise provides student practice in learning how to set goals and the importance of communicating their weekly goal statements to other managers and executives. The top company executives have been most impressed with these P&A reports and often begin to require their own management team to submit this same planning form to them. Students, of course, get great satisfaction from knowing that they are having such a positive impact on their assigned management team.

Each Thursdays discussion class is split in two; the first half is devoted to a discussion of concepts from the two required textbooks and how these ideas apply to their assigned organizations. Students must take on the role of the CEO of their assigned organization when they answer each question, and then suggest a way to change any negative behavior, and the implications of such a move. Both textbooks used in class emphasize quality and productivity issues and further help team members solve their accepted tasks--in each organization. The last hour of Thursday's class is reserved for the presentation of a company problem to members of the class, who in turn give suggestions for solutions (20% of the grade). In other words, the class acts in the capacity of consultant to each other, with the professor acting in a coaching role.

The finished project, which follows the format of the proposal is presented to the CEO and all managers, who give feedback on the quality of the team's work and this report (30% of the course grade). This final presentation also gives each team the needed practice in making a presentation to a CEO and to managers, much like those that they will have to give in their jobs--after graduation.

Tests are worth 30% of the grade and ask each student to use their assigned organization to apply the requested theories from the texts. Again, the emphasis is upon the application of theory, and on learning skills which will benefit the soon-to-be graduate in his or her first job.

Actual knowledge gained by students

Two sources which could be used as legitimate measures of actual student knowledge gained, as compared to other classes, could be student evaluations and actual reactions from manager and executives who allow students to work in their organizations. End of semester student evaluations rate this course among the best taken in our university. Typical comments range from, "I learned more about myself, and how to communicate effectively (especially listening)," to "I gained a better understanding of the effects of behavior on

an individual's motivation to produce." Naturally, any experiential class will allow this self-examination, but not always to the extent experienced in this first sequential class, which may be due in part to the design of the course. The way students are evaluated, the manner in which they interact, and how well they learn to influence other's behavior to produce positive outcomes, creates a dynamic learning environment. And, as already mentioned, each management team give glowing verbal feedback about the results of the field projects. What better way to get an assessment of knowledge than through an evaluation by managers whose expectation may be higher than the very professors who teach the class? As a result of all this learning potential, students give the course high marks! Managers who work with the students also indicate that the class has to be well designed to produce such capable students.

Suggestions for the design of future classes

Unfortunately, because the field project class (BA 457) requires students to spend up to 15 hours of time in their assigned organizations each week, the class can become too much of a burden for some students. This burden could be relieved if the required written final project, for example, was eliminated or traded for an oral final report, using only a written outline.

Any changes that could be made to the experiential class (BA 454) would lessen its potential learning value, so I suggest this be left without change.

There is no question that such a combination of classes takes more than the normal amount of time, and this should be taken into account by the department chair or dean when rewards are given for performance. Not all professors fit into the same "publishing mold," and allowance should be made for those who willingly take on this increased workload. After all, if students learn and rate such classes higher, the department or school and the professor win.

DISCUSSION

The most recent field project class gave students the opportunity to implement quality circles in a major hotel, a candy company, the YMCA and a major grocery chain. Unfortunately, as already mentioned, this type of learning situation requires more of a professor's time than a normal lecture class, and students as well, must devote more than the normal amount of work to this class, but it pays higher dividends for all. Many students are hired by the same field project firm to continue the work started by the student team or the CEO gives a glowing recommendation to other employers who are interviewing members of student teams to work for them. This sequence of classes truly allows students to practice what was preached in the classroom--and to do it well! Most professors who labor in the profession of teaching, who use an experiential approach, know the pure gratification that comes from seeing the lights turn-on in their students' minds. These classes are no exception; they are pure joy to orchestrate. It is quite satisfying to see students who were once in a classroom situation really come to life in a field setting and begin to function as professionals--dealing with members of their assigned organizations as experienced organization development consultants. Additionally, the professor may well be offered consulting opportunities to continue this work, which provides for further academic and financial development.

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