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DEVELOPING STUDENT TEAM-BUILDING AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS USING COMPUTER-AIDED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses communication style as a factor in a computer-aided experiential developed for interior design pre-professionals to aid student learning visually and also to develop the team-building skills so essential for the boundary-spanning role of professionals in this field. An assessment of the communication style of the team members and leaders was used to identify positive strategies to build teamwork and leadership skills.

INTRODUCTION

The development of student communication skills and leadership skills during the educational experience is one of the goals of any educational institution. The guiding philosophy for education to date has been the culturally patterned belief that a teacher's work is to transmit a body of knowledge to students. However, many people learn better by teaching others, not just by listening to lectures. (Hall, 1981). Team interaction can provide students with further opportunities to develop interpersonal and communication skills.

A number of researchers has investigated factors such as communication style, team cohesiveness, and team size relating to team performance in the classroom. Gosenpud and Wolfe (1990) analyzed decision-making and the stages of development in a graduate level student management team. They found that the majority of the team players had a unilateral communication orientation. Gentry (1980) found that a team size of three functioned with less dissension than teams of four members. Wolfe and Box (1986) investigated the relationship of team cohesiveness to performance and found that team cohesiveness can facilitate effective communication among team members.

ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION STYLE

The present project was based on a prior study in which the leadership experiential was contained within a larger experiential learning project (Mehlhoff and Mauldin, 1990). As students experienced positive outcomes working with the original project, it seemed logical to focus on the leadership and team-building component for further evaluation. As increased levels of effective communication may contribute to team-building and team cohesiveness, a measurement of communication style (Truell, 1975) was selected as an assessment tool. The 20-item questionnaire is used to categorize respondents into four communication styles: 1) the Analyzer is characterized by placing high value on facts and figures, 2) the Affiliator places high value on interpersonal relationships and feelings, 3) the Conceptualizer values ideas, concepts and theory, and 4) the Activator values action and results.

Results showed student leader profiles on the communication styles measurement were grouped in categories three and four. Three student leaders were Conceptualizers and were future-oriented. They can be described as questioning and visionary. The two student leaders who fell in the fourth category of communication style (Activators) were practically oriented. Communication profiles of the balance of the class were concentrated in the Affiliator style and valued personal relationships.

Group dynamics illustrated that the student leaders who were Conceptualizers were able to visualize possibilities for the project and to utilize team-building techniques to teach their team members effectively. The Activators were also effective leaders, but at times were too assertive for the Affiliators. As a means of helping students and leaders understand how their communication style influenced team effort and group dynamics, one class session was used as a debriefing technique.

CONCLUSIONS

Interior design professionals are boundary-spanning individuals, with responsibilities to both clients and craftsmen or contractors. The analysis of the communication style of interior design students created a greater awareness of effective communication for each of the team members who participated in the computer-aided experiential. Additionally, the team leaders benefited from the evaluation of communication style as a factor in developing team-building techniques.

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