

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH, INC.

An Experiential Learning Activity Developed
As a Practicum for a Course in
Organizational Communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential learning activity that was designed to provide a practicum for students enrolled in a course in organizational communication. The simulation involved setting up a corporate structure in which students were placed after having submitted employment applications and resumes. The corporation was given a research task which was to be completed by the end of the semester. This simulation can easily be adapted to other business courses such as those in management, personnel, public relations and so forth.

INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with a brief review of literature which focuses on the need for practical application opportunities in education and the role that simulations can play in filling that need. Part two is a description of the specific goals of the simulation conducted, and the subjects who participated in the activity. Part three provides the procedures of the simulation process, the steps followed in implementing the simulation and the methods used in evaluating the activity. The conclusion contains suggestions for ways that this simulation might be adapted for use in other courses.

One of the challenges facing educators today is the development of curriculum and teaching methods that enable the student to step into the work setting with a battery of useable skills. U.S. Commissioner of Education, Terrel H. Bell [1] speaking of universities in general, points out that the past emphasis on liberal education steeped in theory and abstract knowledge is not enough: "Today we in education must recognize that it is also our duty to provide our students with saleable skills." In a summary of current research identifying communication skills in various organizational contexts, DiSalvo indicates that the 60's will see "continued pressure for education to deal with issues of subject matter relevancy and course accountability 5, p. 2811; he stresses the need for college education programs to "focus on the development of practical and applied skills that undergraduate students can take into the marketplace after graduation" [5, p. 281].

The challenge of relevancy faces speech communication educators with particular impact because more and more speech communication graduates are entering non-teaching professions. Jamieson and Wolvin [6] not only recognize the need for relevance but also suggest that departments of speech communication survey employers located within their geographic area to determine what positions are available and what competencies are needed. They suggest that three things must be done to emphasize training for non-

teaching careers in communication: (1) identify career employment options in the field of communication; (2) specify competencies necessary for effective functioning in these careers; and (3) construct a curriculum capable of preparing students for such careers. In fact, "How does this apply to the real world? or "How does this fit in with a job?" are the most commonly heard comments in speech education classes [14]. Yet, at present communication courses as taught in universities give students little opportunity to practice communication skills. This state of affairs is unfortunate since learning takes place where there is movement from abstract and general principles to specific applications including practice [11].

One aspect of experiential education that can be one of the most effective ways of teaching communication concepts is simulation activity. Such experiential learning can be evaluated along five dimensions: (1) activity; (2) realism; (3) cognition; (4) affectivity; and (5) involvement [3].

John Dewey and Maria Montessori, early advocates of experiential learning, emphasized the role of experience and communication in education nearly 75 years ago [4; 8]. While the idea is not new, it is one that needs to be constantly redefined.

DESCRIPTION

Objectives

Communication Research Inc. (CRI) is a simulation of a research and consulting firm that was developed to provide a semester-long practicum that would allow students to put theory into practice for a class in organizational communication. The learning activity, coordinated with classroom lectures and discussions, does this in two ways. First, it provides students who have not had extensive experience in the workforce or corporate world both exposure to some of the communication problems that occur in business organizations and also an opportunity to develop skills that will help them communicate effectively in business and organizational settings. Secondly, CRI provides those students with experience in the business world with an opportunity to take a look at organizational communication processes from perspectives that include awareness of their situation rather than simply going through the motions of their routine.

The CRI simulation thus provides a setting where students can evaluate the communication process in an organization from seven points of analysis. Those

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are: (1) organizational and communication climate; (2) message distortion in subordinate-superior interaction; (3) relational communication; (4) communication networks; (5) leadership styles; (6) motivation; and (7) conflict management. At the conclusion of the course students are asked to submit a paper assessing the communication process from the point of view of a participant observer.

A subsidiary goal of CRI is to acquaint students with career opportunities available to speech communication graduates. Following Jamieson and Wolvin's [6] suggestion, corporate tasks center around job availability and required communication competencies.

Subjects

Participants in the CRI simulation were juniors and seniors enrolled in a class that brings together many of the concepts taught in lower division speech communication classes and applies them to the organizational setting. The course, therefore, not only introduces students to contemporary research, but also serves as a career preparation course for communication and business majors interested in learning communication and interaction skills which can later be applied in their organizational lives.

PROCEDURES

Design

CRI is a simulation according to the definition offered by Shirts (13) who classifies games and simulations into three kinds of activities: simulations, games, and contests. Simulations are defined as non-contest and non-game and are modeled after reality. In addition, CRI fulfills the following learning goals of structured experiences posited by Pfeiffer and Jones:

- Cognitive: Awareness of content; incorporation and use of content; generalization; conceptual integration.
- Affective: Self-awareness, ownership of feelings, insight, empathy, awareness of inner life, awareness of personal and interpersonal processes.
- Skill Building: Development, practice, and implementation of interpersonal skills and techniques such as listening, problem solving, and intervening. [10, p.3]

The creation of the CRI was a five step process: (1) identifying the objectives; (2) selecting a name for the organization; (3) determining a general task orientation for the corporation; (4) developing an organizational chart and dividing general tasks into several sub-task areas for each department; and (5) creating job descriptions, application forms, and evaluation procedures. Though adapted to meet the specific need of the course, the CRI simulation follows Covert and Thomas' (3) CREATE model: Choose goals and objectives, Review characteristics of participants, Explicate or describe the activity, Assemble the materials and equipment needed, and Test or conduct a "dry run," and Evaluate the simulation and goal achievement.

Implementation

Implementation of the simulation involved: (1) an explanation in class of the activity and the parameters the simulation; (2) the collection of resumes and job

applications from students; (3) screening candidates for executive positions by a board of directors made up of graduate students based on resumes and applications; (4) conducting interviews by the board of directors for executive and management positions; (5) announcement of corporate appointments; and (6) the assignment of the balance of the class members to research positions in various departments. The project was then turned over to the newly appointed president with the understanding that the instructor's future relationship with the corporation would be in the role of chairman of the board and not a supervisor or advisor.

The corporation contracted with the board to provide a book of career information that would be useful to students of speech communication. Some of the specific tasks assigned to the departments included surveying department alumni concerning their current positions, assisting in the planning and running of the University's Careers in Communication Day, compiling an information packet on careers in speech communication for the University's Office of Career Planning and Placements, and planning and publicizing a speech communication alumni night, where recent graduates shared their career and academic experiences.

After receiving their responsibilities, participants decided corporate policy at the appropriate levels and developed research approaches to their specific task areas. Time was allocated near the end of the class period for corporate business. Managers and supervisors set up out of class meetings during this time. The exercise continued throughout the semester with occasional feedback to the chairman of the board which was directed through the president of CRI. At the end of the semester the chairman of the board was presented with one of the corporate products--a book of career materials developed and researched by the various departments and compiled by officers or the corporation.

Evaluation

The CRI simulation design did not include a pre-test and post-test of student knowledge and thus suffers from the same deficiency noted by Stevens and Burton (15) in evaluating their personnel administration simulation. Stevens and Burton [15] also cite Kirkpatrick who suggests that evaluation should consider four criteria--reaction, learning, behavior, and results. The evaluation of the CRI simulation like the Stevens and Burton simulation relies heavily on student re- action.

The evaluation phase of the CRI simulation served three purposes: (1) providing students with an opportunity to evaluate the communication process that occurred in the simulation and to view those observations in light of the theory and research discussed during the course; (2) giving students exposure to several assessment instruments that are useful in per- forming a communication analysis; and (3) allowing the instructor, teaching assistants, and students an opportunity to evaluate the simulation as a learning exercise and make suggestions for improvement of the simulation.

The first goal was facilitated by the assignment of the term paper and a debriefing session that was held at the end of the semester. The assignment called for a term paper requiring students to "analyze the communication observed in CRI and relate these observations to the theory and research discussed during the course." The assignment was made early in the semester and students were advised to keep a log of their impressions and experiences. The debriefing session was conducted by the instructor with time allocated

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for discussion of the course content as it applied to the CRI simulation and a discussion of the simulation itself. The debriefing session followed both the Covert and Thomas' [3] DEAL model (Do, Examine, Analyze, Link) and the Pfeiffer and Jones [9] Experiential Model. A review of the analysis papers revealed that students experienced a variety of communication and managerial problems depending on their placement in the organization and their task assignments. (See Appendix A for brief examples of student comments.)

The second goal of the evaluation process was accomplished by the administration of several instruments designed for communication analysis. Students found the instruments interesting, though the results of the surveys would not reflect accurate research data. The research implications of each of the instruments was discussed with students in a class period near the end of the semester and a review of appropriate procedures for administration of such instruments was discussed.

The third evaluation goal was accomplished by the administration of an evaluation and communication analysis instrument (see Appendix B) designed by one of the graduate students enrolled in the course and by an oral discussion of the activity. Participant suggestion from the anonymous surveys and the classroom discussion were noted and incorporated in subsequent runnings of the simulation.

CONCLUSION

The CRI simulation was designed for a course in organizational communication but a similar activity could be used in a number of business related courses such as management, personnel, and public relations. The research task orientation of the model corporation could serve the same purpose the CRI served the communication department--that is, aiding the departments involved in developing career oriented information by collecting such data as graduate Job placements, skills required by employers and needed by graduates entering the workplace, or other career related matters. Other research goals and objectives could be set by the instructor, by the corporation, or jointly by both.

CRI fills the educational need of providing students with a practical dimension to their study that encourages skill development. The simulation also provides instructors information that is useful in making courses more career oriented. In addition CRI gathered resource materials for students regarding skills they should acquire for various career directions, one of the CRI research tasks, adapted from a suggestion by McBath and Burhans [7] who feel that departments should collect data both on what graduates do after they leave school and on how satisfied those graduates were with the education the department provided them.

The simulation also provides opportunities for the development of many concomitant skills: management, interviewing, resume preparation, group process, quality control, and so forth. Any one of these could be the focus of the activity depending on the nature of the course using the experiential learning activity.

APPENDIX A

Student Comments

"Even though we all knew the organization was a fictional classroom exercise, its impact was greater than we initially believed. Managers and workers jokingly referred to their supervisors as 'boss' outside of class in addition to remaining in their roles."

"The organizational experience was a refreshing way of learning communication on a first-hand basis."

"Analyzing this organization was like taking a course in hours not to have a cold, nonlistening, task-oriented organization, because you learned what it was like to be in one... total isolation is hell."

"Instead of confronting the rising conflict, my manager at first tended to ignore it and pretend it did not exist."

APPENDIX B ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS PRACTICUM REACTION SHEET

This reaction sheet has two purposes. 1) It assists in the design future experiential instruction by help- tug determine needed modifications, and 2) it provides an instrument for measuring the degree to which the practicum helped students achieve course objectives.

1. Please check the appropriate category:

_____ Research Team Member _____ Management

2. Please circle the number on the following scales that best indicates your response to the following questions:

a. Do you think the Practicum experience will have a practical application for you?

definitely 1 2 3 4 5 6 definitely not

b. Overall how would you rate your immediate supervisor in terms of leadership?

average 1 2 3 4 5 6 Outstanding

c. Overall how would you rate the Practicum in terms of providing an opportunity to apply principles and concepts discussed in class?

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 Outstanding

d. How would you describe the organizational climate of CRI?

Open 1 2 3 4 5 6 Closed

e. Did you understand your responsibilities in the organization?

rarely 1 2 3 4 5 6 always

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- f. Were meetings productive?
rarely 1 2 3 4 5 6 always
- g. Were instructions and other communications within the organization transmitted effectively?
rarely 1 2 3 4 5 6 always
- h. How would you rate your performance in the organization?
Outstanding 1 2 3 4 5 6 Less than average
- i. How would you rate your research team's performance?
Less than average 1 2 3 4 5 6 Outstanding
3. Please offer your frank responses to the following questions:
- What did you find most valuable in the practicum experience.
 - How could the practicum be improved?
 - Which concepts, skills, or principles do you think the Practicum best illustrated and provided an opportunity to experience?
4. Are there other comments you would like to make? If so, please offer them. THANK YOU.

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