

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

THE LEARNING CO-OP APPROACH TO THE CORE POLICY COURSE

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ABSTRACT

The 'Learning Co-op' approach to the core Policy course is a variation of open learning. Coordinated objectives enable members to acquire and apply career-oriented policy concepts. Members direct meetings that incorporate responsibilities and positions for all members. Members come to meetings with "admission tickets" requiring application of policy concepts to current policy activities of organizations. Management reports replace "assignments." Each team makes a presentation covering the strategic management of an ongoing organization, followed by a Structured discussion period. The professor, as the Co-op's CEO, encourages "followers to become leaders in an open, spontaneous, creative, and often fun-filled environment.

INTRODUCTION

"In this Policy Seminar you are not students, but future managers. This is not a class, but a meeting of our Learning Co-op." (First words heard by students enrolled in Professor Balke's Organizational Policy, BUSAD 4513.)

The philosophical ideals of the Policy Learning Co-op have their roots in "open learning" concepts supported by various authors, including Pulliam and Bowman (14), Nyquist (12), Leonard (11), and Theobald (17). Open learning ideals include elements such as: a setting in which students are self-directed, rather than being educator-dominated; topics that are important to the learner's future life, as well as to his career; a broad, multi-disciplinary approach, dealing with issues and problems with no exact answers; learning by involvement in what is to be learned, versus vicarious learning; learning through development of questioning and criticizing skills in a low-risk atmosphere; and a climate that encourages openness, spontaneity, humor, and ecstasy in learning.

The author first applied a simple version of a student directed approach to policy case presentations at San Diego State University, in 1972, then developed other components later, at McGill University. The present advanced approach, first used at Oklahoma State University in 1979, is the result of utilizing student feedback and carrying forward only the components that have proven to be satisfactory.

The author is not aware of any comprehensive undertaking, such as reported herein, to apply a comprehensive and sophisticated open learning approach to the core senior level Policy course. The approach used by Vardi in an introductory management course, recently brought to the author's attention, does contain some rough parallels. (19) Incidentally, Dr. James Townsend, at Kansas State University, has been pleased with his application of the author's approach in two Policy sections in the Fall, 1980 semester. The authors students have consistently responded positively to the Learning Co-ops stimulating approach to Policy, however, the approach is not without its problems.

LEARNING CO-OP OBJECTIVES

The content objective of the Learning Co-op is similar to that of any policy course, i.e., the acquisition and application of policy concepts within a strategic management framework, such as that provided by Glueck.

(9) One of the Learning Co-op's distinctive content objectives is to relate each member's experiences, knowledge, and life/career plans to the policy/strategy concepts to be amassed. Members are thereby encouraged to develop their own "theories-in-use" (2) that may diverge from, or be variations of, propositions such as those developed by Glueck.

Learning Co-op process objectives differ from those of more traditional policy seminars in various ways. The design of the co-op is based on previous members' feedback on what was useful to them (not the professor). Members direct and control the activities of each meeting. Each member is expected to think and behave as a manager, sharing his findings and insights in a spirit of active co-operation (hence the name, "co-op"), rather than the passivity typical of lecture classes or the competition of case-study classes. (15)

The co-op's objective of reducing, and hopefully, removing faculty domination of learning activities contrasts with traditional roles and expectations of both faculty and students. Argyris reports that even when a faculty member insists on student participation in a case study, the actual behavior of the faculty member is one of dominating and controlling the proceedings.

(1) Students have become habituated to such domination in classrooms, as exemplified by the results of a recent survey of the expectations of students in a required business course at the University of Colorado at Boulder and Denver: Students indicated that it was important to them that the professor deliver knowledge, make them think, and allow them to be passive(!). Few responses could be interpreted as indicating any awareness of the value of the students' own experiences and resources, or of the need for students to prepare for their managerial careers by doing what leaders do. (8)

Co-op objectives generally attempt to Counter the idea that "No school of business has yet devised a way to teach the 'Real World' in the Classroom." (4) Since our objectives are obviously designed for each member's personal benefit, the learning experience is relevant, enjoyable, interspersed with humor, and occasionally has elements of ecstasy!

LEARNING CO-OP ACTIVITIES

Policy/Strategy Concepts and Career Plans

Meetings in the first half of the semester are designed to prepare members to apply concepts necessary to deal with complex policy/strategy aspects of organizational situations to be covered in team presentations in the second half of the semester. These aspects typically include values, objectives, strategy selection, implementation, evaluation, and contingency plans. Since connecting each member's career plan to these concepts is vital, each member prepares a written career plan, following a scheme designed by Bolles. (3)

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Admission Tickets

"Admission Tickets" constitute an unusual key component used in many learning co-op meetings. Each member is expected to read the material required for a given meeting and relate one or more policy concepts in the material to a recent article in any of a number of magazines or journals. On half of an 8½ X 11 sheet, he also notes how the idea may be useful for his own management career. Members submit their tickets to the Chairperson for the day, who decides (during the first ten or fifteen minutes, during which the professor, as CEO makes his comments) which ticket articles to use, and when. There may not be time for every member to present his findings, but he may be called next time. In any case, each member comes prepared with material that is relevant both to himself and to others.

Position Responsibilities

Several "positions" designed by the author are rotated among members, these include: Chairperson, Recorder, Facilitator, Protagonist, Devil's Advocate, Cassandra, Enquirer, Jester, Evaluator, and Member. These positions enable Learning Co-op members to do consciously what managers at meetings do intuitively. The Chairperson, Recorder, Facilitator, Evaluator, and Member are adaptations of positions detailed by Doyle and Straus for successful management meetings. (7) The Cassandra position is an adaptation of a position designed by Janis to prevent "group-think." (10) The remaining positions are the author's own versions of typical positions in meetings. Following are brief descriptions of these positions:

Chairperson.--Follows general procedures of the Learning Co-op. Is responsible for the day's agenda and conducting the meeting. Utilizes the resources of the group to achieve stated objectives. Does not lecture, reflects back to the members any questions that are asked, and keeps his own responses down to one sentence per query.

Recorder.--Records highlights of members' deliberations on a flip-chart, making each individual contributors idea the property of the group.

Facilitator.--Monitors the meeting's processes, makes suggestions to improve processes, defends members from criticism, and acts as timekeeper. May summarize his views at the end of the meeting.

Protagonist.--During the meeting, makes positive, supportive comments relative to ideas presented by members and clarifies members' ideas.

Devil's Advocate.--Makes comments deliberately contrary to those expressed by members, for the sake of livening and enriching the discussion. Acts as a critic and a "crap detector," (13) exposing fallacies, lack of logic and defects in research findings and publications.

Cassandra.---Remarks on the adverse consequences that would follow if some of the ideas or recommendations were followed to their logical conclusion, or to a ridiculous extreme in the future. Points out the risks and problems in every opportunity.

Jester.--Ensures that discussions do not get too serious by inserting relevant humor and noting the lighter side of situations. May present a humorous highlight or overview at the end of the meeting.

Enquirer.--Is responsible for asking questions during the meeting, probing topics that may have been superfi-

Evaluator.--Ensures that the agenda is adequately covered, that the topics are elaborated but not smothered, and that the quality of the discussion is maintained.

Member.---Is expected to think and to be a manager at every meeting. Comes prepared to provide creative inputs and insights, with particular emphasis on connections to his future life and career.

With these responsibilities, each member has an opportunity to experience and control meeting dynamics for greater effectiveness. The group's more talented and experienced members provide others with models of excellence in performing their responsibilities, while others may require feedback and training from the CEO. After several meetings, members who ordinarily would be passive listeners often demand that they be heard; and the Facilitator may admonish the CEO for "talking too much"!

Management Reports

Members submit several "Management Reports that in an academic setting would be titled take-home exams" or "assignments." Our management reports follow a format identical to those used in organizations, in that each member writes as a manager reporting to the CEO. Following the distinctive themes of the Learning Co-op, the reports are expected to relate to current and future organizational situations, connect to policy-related concepts, and to be viewed as useful to the member in his future career. Reports may cover topics such as the following: categorizing the duties of a practicing manager, analyzing environmental threats and opportunities for a local organization, examining an organizations internal strategic advantages and weaknesses, and analyzing the components of an organizational decision, negotiation, or conflict.

Developing these individualized reports expands the member's understanding of policy concepts and aids in the development of his own theories-in-use."

Team Presentations

Team presentations, commonly called "case studies" in conventional settings, comprise the only exam-like activity in the Learning Co-op. Teams choose from a list that includes ongoing organizations, design of a new organization, or up-dating existing "case" material. A typical thirty-minute presentation is followed by a thirty-minute question and discussion period in which the Chairperson makes use of members' ideas on admission tickets and organizes the discussion, making use of the positions described above.

Peer Evaluation of Participation

Half-way through, and at the end of the semester, each member evaluates all other members' quality of participation in the meetings of the co-op. This experience provides invaluable experience in managerial evaluation skills. To date, with rare exceptions, these evaluations have been remarkably realistic.

Grading

The grading scheme is designed to give both talkers" and "writers" an opportunity to excel. The points available are almost equally distributed among the four activities: admission tickets, management reports quality of participation, and team presentations.

Thus, Learning Co-op members apply writing skills and verbal skills, individual and team effort, behavioral

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and non-behavioral techniques, and abstract concepts as well as wisdom and practitioners' ideas. Finally, members obtain a wholistic view of the strategic management of several organizations in diverse industries, through team presentations and discussions. Every activity is part of a consistent embodiment of Learning Co-op objectives and ideals.

EVALUATING THE LEARNING CO-OP EXPERIENCE

Fifty-one members of the Summer section of the Learning Co-op recently evaluated the usefulness of the experience, averaging 8.0 on a 0 - 10 scale. Considering the admitted conservative tendencies of the members, the college, and the community, the results may be considered as relatively favorable! Evaluations indicated that the Chairman's position and the team presentations were the most highly valued components.

The extent of acquisition of behavioral skills, non-behavioral skills, and wisdom" has not been measured but is observable in some of the more dramatic changes seen in members, and in their feedback comments. The team's organizational study is probably the first comprehensive set of analyses and recommendations that members have made. Members who normally remain silent in classes become adept at presentations and at chairing meetings. Many who lacked confidence in themselves at the beginning of the semester find that they can conduct an employment interview without fear. Members who had naive views of management make polished, sophisticated presentations and respond to difficult questions articulately and professionally. Many who had generally accepted what lecturers presented become adept at questioning and healthy criticism. Finally, those who believed that Policy was a tough and "heavy" course find that concepts can be learned with a dash of levity. Some of these changes should be quantifiable and measurable.

CAVEATS

Those desiring to implement the procedures described could find it relatively easy, since the author has winnowed out only those ideas that have worked over a period of many years. However, it is more likely that any implementation will run into difficulties or surprises, just as the author has had his share of problems.

Most implementers will be tempted to use open learning approaches in conjunction with traditional approaches, in order to accustom members to the transition. However, it is most desirable to work toward one consistent approach with a distinctive theme throughout.

The faculty member initiating a Learning Co-op must be prepared to change his dominant attitude and style to one of allowing members to dominate meetings, while he listens carefully and intrudes only when absolutely necessary. Instead of being the entertainer, he must allow members to entertain themselves, and to decide for themselves what is interesting or relevant. (He must "let go," just as the father teaching a child to ride a bike must let go.)

The professor as CEO must be flexible and constantly aware of his own aspirations and assumptions that may differ from members' recommendations.

The faculty member initiating such a different approach will need to gain understanding and acceptance from his colleagues and members of administration, through whatever methods of "conditioning" he deems most appropriate. (5)

For a few members out of a group of forty, the leap from conventional learning to the Learning Co-op may be too much of a strain. If these do not drop the seminar a great deal of patient counseling is required on the part of the CEO. The CEO must learn to acclimatize himself to unexpected varieties of resistance to the new approach. For sincere members who are trying, but having difficulty, nevertheless, the CEO must be willing to expend extra efforts to help them over this period. Both faculty member and students need to learn to cope with ambiguity in a conventional Policy course, but these ambiguities are considerably magnified when using an open learning approach.

Some of the problems indicated in members' feedback comments will require immediate, insightful action in order to demonstrate to the group that they do have some control over their activities. Great persistence and single-mindedness of purpose are required to cope with both resistance to change and demands for change without becoming discouraged. (5, 6)

CONCLUSION

The Policy Learning Co-op in action constantly strives to go "beyond simulation." It approaches the "Ultimate Experiential Exercise," i.e., not a simulation, but an actual learning organization directed by its members. (16) The sophistication and complexity of the approach match the ambiguity and complexity to be faced by the members as future manager-practitioners.

The CEO of such an organization must be devoted, flexible, and patient, with a singular desire to meet the needs of the members of the Learning Co-op through a consistent set of strategies and objectives. (18)

The Policy Learning Co-op's strategies demonstrate such consistency in implementing the following objectives:

- To acquire and apply strategic management concepts useful to its members,
- To interrelate these concepts with past, current, and future organizational strategy activities,
- To interrelate these concepts with each member's future life and career,
- To remove the dominance of the faculty member,
- To have each member think and be a manager at every meeting
- To develop questioning and healthy criticism habits,
- To free members and develop their confidence by providing an opportunity for openness, spontaneity, humor and even ecstasy, in a relatively risk-free setting.

Policy professors ready to implement the Policy Learning Co-op may expect to be rewarded by the members' responses, and may develop variations that are truly the learning approach of the future.

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