

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

IN SUPPORT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: RESULTS OF A FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

In a recent survey, business graduates who had served as lab section managers in the Illinois State University introductory management program were asked to identify the real world benefits and shortcomings of selected learning experiences. Because these people had been given important responsibilities and some authority as lab managers, program administrators felt that the lab manager experience would be of substantial value when the person accepted a position after graduation. Study results point out some of the benefits of the lab manager learning experience and provide support for continuation of the lab manager program. Findings also provide general support for experientially oriented education processes. Finally, study results point to areas where experiential exercises could be developed to more fully prepare business students to function effectively in "real world" organizations.

BAGKGROUND

In the Fall of 1974, thirteen advanced undergraduate students were selected for involvement in an experientially oriented program designed to give many of them their first exposure to "real" authority and responsibility and to help them develop skills in the areas of communication, leadership, motivation, influence, coaching, performance evaluation, and (evaluative) feedback. Their task was to lead a lab group of 18 to 20 people enrolled in the introductory management course through various exercises and projects designed by the faculty. These lab activities support the material covered earlier in the week in the lecture part of the course.

While the introductory management course has changed over the years, the philosophy and format of the lab manager program have been maintained. Lab managers continue to conduct lab meetings (presently eighty minutes in duration) on their own, without faculty members in attendance. They remain a major communication link between faculty and students. They evaluate lab performance and make recommendations about grades. Their role is one of combination teacher-supervisor, but in as many ways as possible the intent is to make their experience one in which "real world" managerial skills are developed.¹

Over the years, efforts have been made to evaluate various aspects of the program. During the first year of the program, exam performance of the beginning students in the lab sections of the management course was compared with performance of students in the course but not in the lab system. Essentially no difference in scores on multiple choice exams over the text-lecture material was found. Apparently the lecture-lab approach had little negative impact on the introductory management students' understanding of subject content. Student ratings of lab section managers have also been conducted since the beginning of the program. Consistently at least 80 percent of students say their lab managers did an outstanding or very good job.

While there is fairly strong support for continued lab

manager involvement in the basic management program, there is little hard evidence available to determine the actual value of the experience to the lab manager. In addition, most of the softer evidence that has been assimilated on the value of the experience was collected at the end of the semester when lab managers were actually involved in the program, giving the person little time to "test-out" and then reflect on the real value of the skills developed.

What are the perceived long range benefits of the lab manager experience? What rationale should underlie the choice of experiential activities? Do recent graduates have needs which could have been met through experiential learning? In what areas should experiential activities be developed to better prepare students for the "real world?" The major impetus for this study was to be able to answer these and other related questions.

THE SURVEY

A questionnaire was designed to check information from former section managers who currently are employed. Three major areas were investigated. 1) How do the section managers evaluate the experiential program, from the vantage point of additional years of work experience? 2) What personal characteristics are related to differences in perceptions about the value of the manager experience? 3) What additional preparation for work and careers would have been helpful, and if particular needs can be identified, are they pertinent to experiential learning?

The survey was sent to all graduates who had been section managers during the Spring 1979 semester or earlier. Of the 175 questionnaires mailed out, 14 were returned because of address changes, and 70 completed questionnaires were received. The response rate (70 out of 161) was 43 percent. An early indication of interest in the program was that over half the respondents identified themselves, though such identification was not requested. No effort was made to assess differences between respondents and non-respondents.

SURVEY RESULTS

Ratings of Selected Learning Experiences

Students may participate in a number of activities which have "learning by experience" characteristics. These include the lab section manager experience, internships, part time jobs, project teams, student organizations, and assistantships. Respondents rated the value of seven such experiences, plus the value of the capstone Business Problems course. Table 1 presents the results.

One interpretation of these results is that the meaningfulness of the student's responsibilities is important to learning. Interns, officers in student organizations, section managers and teaching assistants all have responsibilities that go beyond typical student responsibilities, and all received high ratings. Participation in project teams also places responsibility

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TABLE 1
RATINGS OF SELECTED LEARNING EXPERIENCES. (PERCENTAGES OF RESPONDENTS WHO REPORTED PARTICIPATING IN THE EXPERIENCE.)

	Extremely Valuable	Generally Helpful	Of Some Help	Little or No Value	(N)
Student Internship	63	21	11	5	(19)
Lab Section Manager	49	47	4	0	(70)
Officer in Club	48	32	19	0	(31)
Undergrad T.A.	46	38	15	0	(13)
Project Team in Course*	42	47	11	0	(38)
Part Time or Summer Jobs	37	37	18	8	(65)
Small Business Team	28	43	22	7	(46)
Problems in Business Course	20	39	27	14	(56)

*Most mentioned courses were Business Organization and Management, Marketing Research, and Problems in Business.

on students, but perhaps in a group oriented less individualistic way. Some of the small business project teams, which consulted with real businesses, appear to have been highly successful learning experiences. However, some other small business projects were less successful experiences, perhaps because of the nature of the business' problem or degree of cooperation. In regard to part time and summer jobs, although they presumably involved responsibility, Students may not have perceived those responsibilities as especially meaningful. The one essentially academic experience on the list, the capstone Problems in Business course, received the lowest ratings.

Evaluation of the Lab Section Manager Experience

As presented in the previous table, ninety-six percent of the respondents rated the lab manager experience as extremely valuable or generally helpful. Respondents also ranked the value of the lab manager experience compared to other learning experiences at the university. The question was general, and did not specify other experiences precisely. Presumably, respondents compared their section manager experience against courses, experiential activities, campus leadership responsibilities and all other experiences. Table 2 presents the results. The fact that ninety-one percent of the respondents evaluated the section manager experience as being in the top quarter of their undergraduate learning experiences is strong support for the program.

Benefits of the Lab Manager Experience

Table 3 shows responses about possible benefits of the lab manager experience. Results are presented generally in order of percentage of respondents who agree with a particular benefit. The most strongly supported benefits are those involving building self-confidence and improving presentation skills. Then, also strongly supported, there seems to be a cluster of skills primarily interpersonal in nature: small group discussions, evaluating others, working with others, sensitivity to others. Two quite pragmatic items are rated next: the experience looks good on resumes, and knowledge of management principles (dealt with in a

previous course) is reinforced. Supervisory skills ranked next, but may not be coming through in the program as much as intended, and additional analysis of how to help section managers improve supervisory skills appears called for. That the program encourages better time management is agreed to by 81 percent of the respondents, though this result probably reflects the fact that section managers simply have lots to do, more than it reflects any specific training on time management. The lowest level of agreement is with the notions that the program improves analytical skills or that it leads to desirable personal contacts.

Demographic Factors and Support for the Program

The fact that the large majority of responses were essentially favorable makes it difficult to isolate any particular variables which relate to attitudes about the program. However, several demographic variables were considered to see if they explained differences between respondents who were extremely favorable toward the programs and those who were no more than generally favorable. Respondents' age, sex, supervisory experience, years since graduation, and average yearly salary increases were investigated for possible correlations with ratings of the program.

Age. No significant differences in responses which could be attributed to age were found.

Sex. Eighty percent of the twenty female respondents ranked the lab manager experience in the top ten percent of all learning experiences, while sixty-three percent of the males did. The difference is not statistically significant, however, using Chi Square.

Years Since Graduation. Although the numbers are too small to demonstrate any meaningful statistical differences, the group of lab managers who participated in the initial start-up of the program may be slightly more positive in their attitudes than the most recent group. One factor which may be operating is that the start-up groups were considerably smaller (13 to 15) than the more recent groups of lab managers (30-36).

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TABLE 2
PERCEIVED VALUE OF THE LAB SECTION MANAGER EXPERIENCE COMPARED
TO OTHER UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING EXPERIENCES.

The lab manager experience was:	Number	Percent
In the top 10 percent in value.	48	69%
In the next 15 percent in value (i.e. better than 75%, but not in the top 10%).	16	23%
In the next 25 percent in value (50-75% range).	4	6%
In the next 25 percent in value (25-50% range).	2	3%
In the lowest 25 percent in value.	0	0%

TABLE 3
BENEFITS OF THE LAB MANAGER EXPERIENCE. (N=70) (PERCENTAGES)

	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	(Percent Agreeing)	Moderately Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Helped build self confidence.	77	23	100	0	0
Improved presentation skills.	79	20	99	1	0
Taught small group discussion skills.	59	36	95	6	0
Helped teach how to evaluate performance of others.	56	39	95	6	0
Improved ability to work with others.	58	36	94	4	1
Improved sensitivity to feelings of others.	33	61	94	4	1
Looked good on a resume.	49	44	93	7	0
Improved knowledge about management principles.	51	40	91	9	0
Improved understandings about motivation.	36	53	89	10	1
Helped clarify how people are different.	34	53	87	13	0
Improved skills at dealing with problem employees.	38	44	82	18	0
Encouraged better "time management."	40	41	81	19	0
Improved analytical skills.	19	59	78	20	1
Led to desirable personal contacts.	17	52	69	30	2

Those in the smaller groups participated more fully in program planning and development, while the more recent groups follow more routine processes.

Average Yearly Salary Improvement. No differences are apparent here. Because the lab managers represent a relatively select group, most might be expected to have reasonable success in salary improvement.

Supervisory Experience. The one factor identified as relating to program evaluations is supervisory experience. There is a modest statistically significant difference (Chi Square shows a difference at the .10 level of significance.) Those who currently supervise others are somewhat more positive about the lab manager experience than are those who are not supervisors.

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TABLE 4
TYPES OF PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED FOR WHICH RESPONDENTS FELT LEAST
PREPARED BY THEIR UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.

	Number Responding n=70	Percentage Identifying Issue
How to function in a political world (political skills/ gamesmanship)	29	41
How to communicate effectively (communication skills)	20	29
How to interview, motivate, evaluate, dismiss, handle grievances (personnel/supervisory skills)	13	19
How to resolve problems and make decisions (problem solving/decision making skills)	10	14
How to perform effectively under time pressures (time management skills)	6	9
Lack of understanding of finance (knowledge of finance)	5	7
Lack of understanding accounting (knowledge of account- ing)	4	6
Lack of understanding of computers (knowledge of com- puters)	4	6
Lack of understanding of legal issues (knowledge of business law)	3	4
Lack of information on how to find a job	3	4
Other (Varied responses--each mentioned only once)	10	14

Needed Additional Preparation

Respondents were also asked to think about their experiences since graduation and indicate the types of problems faced in which they felt least prepared by their university education. Table 4 presents a summary of respondent reactions.

How to deal with organizational realities and function in a political world was the area respondents felt least prepared for by their university educations. Over forty-one percent of those surveyed felt they were lacking in political skill⁸. In addition, fairly large percentages of those surveyed indicated that greater emphasis should be placed on developing skills in communication, personnel and supervision, and problem solving and decision making. While inadequate knowledge in a number of specific areas was identified as a shortcoming of university education, less than seven percent of respondents identified any one particular knowledge deficiency. It is interesting to note that the deficiencies mentioned by the greatest percentage of respondents were skill related, while knowledge related deficiencies were mentioned much less frequently. One interpretation of these results is that the knowledge base provided by university education is, for the most part, adequate; but the development of the necessary skill to function effectively in the real world is badly lacking.

Respondents' reactions to two other questionnaire items provide even greater support for increased emphasis on skill development. When lab managers were questioned about what should be given more emphasis in the ISU business

program, strong support was registered in two areas: 43 percent of the respondents suggested increased emphasis on in-class and out-of-class experiences to facilitate skill development, and 33 percent of the respondents specifically identified a need for greater skill development in oral, written and/or nonverbal communication. When asked what should be given less emphasis, the most common response was less emphasis on theory and more emphasis on practice.

DISCUSSION

The survey strongly supports the experiential section manager program. The vast majority of former section managers were highly positive, with those currently having supervisory responsibilities being especially supportive. Respondents clearly saw the experience as helping build self-confidence and improving presentation skills. In thinking about other perceived benefits, however, some questions can be raised about whether the experience is essentially a maturing one, one which encourages general personal growth, or whether in fact specific supervisory attitude and skills are being developed.

Of course, general maturing and the development of interpersonal and supervisory skills are likely to be interdependent. The possibility exists that the program is successful more for its general maturing aspects than for its skill development aspects, however. Some of the program objectives relating to supervision are not as strongly supported as might be desired.

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For examples only slightly over one third of the respondents strongly agreed that the program helped improve understandings about motivation and individual differences, sensitivity to feelings of others, and skills at dealing with problem employees. It would appear useful to develop better measures of progress in these areas, both for evaluation of those in the program and for longer term analysis.

One area rather directly related to supervising did receive relatively strong support. This is the area of performance evaluation. Because section managers are required to make advisory evaluations of students in their labs (faculty make the actual grade decisions) the issue does receive considerable attention in the program. For many of the section managers, the experience is their first at performance appraisal. Often it is a difficult experience, one which requires learning to clarify performance standards, observe behavior, and evaluate objectively.

Another major interpretation of the survey results is that feelings of responsibility are likely to influence the value of the learning experience. The fact that lab managers have some degree of autonomy and responsibility may contribute to the real-world character of the program. Section managers know that they risk causing harm or creating problems if they do not perform adequately, and their motivation to learn may be strengthened for this reason. Other opportunities for meaningful responsibility, such as internship experiences, some teaching assistantships, and leadership positions in organizations also were highly rated. Perhaps the fact that one's performance in such situations is public and will be evaluated by other people important to the individual has an impact on learning also.

The other major observations drawing from the survey have to do with the kinds of problems these recent graduates report having on the job, and with the implications of their reports for experiential learning. Survey results reflect the need to prepare students to deal with organization realities. Perhaps the greatest deficiency of university graduates today is their inability to skillfully navigate in an organizational world where the impacts of power, politics and gamesmanship are significant. Some specific concerns of lab managers, for example, were: how to deal with older employees (many of whom resent the college graduates' education), how to compete as a woman in business in what some surveyed felt was still "a businessman's world," and how to temper one's over enthusiasm and lofty expectation of work and the work world.

In respond to these concerns, program administrators should consider greater emphasis on experiences involving issues of power, resource scarcity, competitiveness, and misunderstandings between people. Greater exposure to these organizational reality issues could be accomplished by utilizing more exercises in the basic management program with lab managers observing and participating. Experiences in this area would have to be developed if it is discovered that appropriate exercises are not available. Further exposure to real world politics could be accomplished by sensitizing lab managers to the power and politics in the lab section they manage. For example, they could be required to analyze the tactics lab members utilize to influence the behavior of other members. Lab managers could also be encouraged to analyze the political behavior among lab managers, faculty teaching in the introductory management program, and administrators of the program.

Survey results also show a need for continued emphasis on development of communication and supervisory skills. Experiences that increase skill in interpreting non-verbal communication and in evaluating performance and providing feedback appear especially relevant.

While former lab managers identified some knowledge gaps in their university education, more significant shortcomings appear to be skill related. Major efforts are needed to help students develop skills in dealing with organizational realities and continued emphasis needs to be placed on communication and supervisory skill development. Experiential activities seem to be the most viable pedagogy available today to bridge the skill gaps mentioned above.

REFERENCES

- [1] Graf, Lee A. and Peter D. Couch, "A Learning Through Managing Program," Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Daniel C. Brenenstuhl and William D. Biggs, editors (The Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Conference of the Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, 1980), pp. 29-31.