

# Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

## A LEARNING THROUGH MANAGING PROGRAM

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### ABSTRACT

Advanced undergraduate students serve as managers of labs in the introductory management course. While administering relatively structured experiential activities, lab managers have opportunity to improve several supervisory skills. The lab work is supported by classroom training on working with problem employees, evaluating performance, group discussion skills, coaching and project supervision. Students perceive the lab manager experience to be extremely valuable. Careful planning and administration by faculty are essential for program success.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on an experientially oriented undergraduate management program which provides learning opportunities at two levels. At the basic level, students enrolled in the introductory management course participate in experiential activities in a lab situation. At the advanced level, undergraduate students who have completed the basic course serve as managers of the basic lab sections. Because these advanced students have important responsibilities and some authority, their learning experiences as lab managers have real meaning. Our major focus in this paper is on the experiential learning program for the advanced students who serve as managers of projects and activities of the beginning students.

### EVOLUTION OF THE PROGRAM

The lab manager program has a number of roots. In the late 1960's, one of the authors participated in the development of a highly innovative undergraduate management program at Western Michigan University. Under the leadership of J.M. Keenan and several others, a program was built on the premise that leaning to manage requires experience in dealing with managerial problems. In essence, the W.M.U. group created a structure of courses, student organizations, and projects that gave students several semesters of experience in relatively significant managerial roles. The Illinois State University program began in 1974, after several years of experimentation there. Probably most of the management programs using experiential approaches also were influenced by the well known observations of Livingston, Mintzberg and others who criticized traditional management education because it failed to adequately prepare people for the realities of managerial careers.

At Illinois State, the introductory management course currently enrolls over 600 students each semester. Students attend two seventy-five minute classes per week. In one, a regular faculty member lectures and discusses the subject with from 50 to 60 students. These students also are subdivided into three labs administered by lab managers during the other class period. A standard text is used and exams over text and lecture material are given. Students work in teams to prepare a major written report, and in most of the lab periods, some type of experiential exercise is used. It is important to note that the lab exercises are quite structured; each is intended to relate to a particular course topic.

Students use a lab workbook which among other things asks them to reflect on and generalize about their experiences in the labs. The exercises stress development of skills in planning, goal setting, performance evaluation, communication, work scheduling and the like.

Since its inception in 1974, the Management Program has changed in several ways. Originally, all students attended one lecture in mass, 300 or more at a time. A switch to smaller lecture sections in the Fall of 1977 resulted in significantly improved student attitudes toward the course; somewhat more opportunity for face to face contact with a faculty member appears important to the students. The exercises and projects used in the course have increased in structure over the years; the original desire by faculty to encourage individual initiative to lean has been tempered by the perception that most students at the junior level are still highly dependent on faculty, and something of a weaning process must take place.

### THE LAB MANAGERS' ROLE

The role of the lab section managers has been fairly stable since the program began. Each of the 36 current lab managers is expected to lead a lab group of 18 to 20 people through the various exercises and projects designed by the faculty. Lab managers conduct the lab meetings on their own, without faculty members in attendance. The managers are the main communications link between faculty and students. They evaluate lab performance and make recommendations about grades. Their role is a combination teacher-supervisor; in as many ways as possible the intent is to make their experience one in which managerial skills will be developed.

### LAB MANAGER PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

#### Program Objectives

The objectives of the lab manager program are to permit a selected number of advanced undergraduate students to develop skills in the following areas:

1. communication
2. leadership
3. motivation and influence
4. performance evaluation
5. coaching and feedback

#### Selection of Lab Managers

Lab manager positions are filled through a fairly rigorous selection process. This process begins in the fourth week of each semester when lab manager applications for the following semester are made available to students. At the end of the eighth week, completed applications are screened and faculty and lab manager recommendations are obtained for each applicant. Final lab manager selection is based upon a number of criteria

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including the number of credit hours completed, course work background, previous work and leadership experiences, grade point average, a one page response to the question "Why do you want to be a section manager," and faculty and lab manager recommendations. Those selected for inclusion in the program register for a three credit hour course entitled "Project Supervision."

### Training of Lab Managers

The objectives of the project supervision course are accomplished through numerous programs such as day-long workshops, small group discussions with faculty lecturers and program administrators, individual and group feedback sessions with professionals in the university counseling center, weekly (two-hour) exercise preparation sessions, and through individual and small group discussions with the project supervision UTA (undergraduate teaching assistant). The UTA is a former lab manager who acts as an advisor to lab managers and coordinates material disbursements (overheads, lab manager handout materials, project materials, and exercise materials) in the program.

Developing group leadership skills. Each semester begins with a day long workshop to clarify for lab managers the part they are to play in the beginning management course and help them to develop skills in leading groups. Topics for the day include the role of the section manager, developing group leadership skills, and process analyzing group behavior. Most of the day is spent in skill development activities and exercises in these topical areas.

Administering weekly lab exercises and activities. Lab managers meet in a two-hour training session at the beginning of each week and prepare for the week's activity or experiential exercise. The general format of weekly meetings is as follows:

1. The first twenty to thirty minutes in each weekly meeting are spent discussing what was learned, what problems were encountered, and what personal goals were accomplished through the lab experience in the previous week. At the beginning of each semester, lab managers are required to develop a list of personal goals they would like to see accomplished through the lab manager experience. In the first few minutes of each weekly session individual lab managers share with the group the goals they see themselves accomplishing; they also describe how they have been able to accomplish them. Next, individual lab managers relate to the group the unique learning experiences they have had in preparation for labs or in the labs themselves. The last few minutes of this first segment of the weekly meeting are spent discussing the problems section managers are encountering in their labs. Group discussion on individual lab manager problems is encouraged. Generally, lab managers as a group are very successful in helping individual lab managers develop feasible problem resolution strategies. When the group's analysis does not result in feasible strategies for problem resolution, program administrators provide the needed coaching. Lab managers are required to keep a journal of their experiences and make entries on a weekly basis to formalize their perceptions of the more significant lab experiences.
2. The second segment of each weekly meeting (about one hour) is spent preparing lab managers to administer the weeks' activity or experiential exercise. This preparation begins with the dissemination of a set of typed notes on how to administer the exercise for the week. Discussion of every exercise follows a standardized format. This involves identification and discussion of the objectives of the exercise, a discussion of how the exercise relates to the text material, and the actual procedure the students in the lab should follow

3. to complete the exercise (including a time schedule). The remainder of this block of time is generally spent in preparing lab managers to discuss the exercise with lab students, in pinpointing potential problem areas in administering the exercise, and in clarifying misconceptions about the exercise.
3. The final segment of each weekly lab manager meeting (usually thirty to forty minutes) is devoted to further role clarification or expanding lab manager skills. For example, lab managers are expected to work with project teams involved in a group term project and the role they are to play in this process frequently needs further clarification. The desired role in this situation is to act as a coach and facilitate the functioning of the group. Coaching skills in this instance involve learning to ask questions to get project teams to think rather than just giving them answers; they explain the relevance of information and help the group develop their own alternatives for problem resolution. Other issues include skill development in performance evaluation (how to evaluate student performance in labs) and skill development in the areas of counseling and feedback (how to help student groups function more effectively and how to communicate to ineffective performers). Personnel from the university counseling center have frequently been involved in training sessions in the areas of counseling and providing feedback.

At the end of each semester lab managers are asked to develop a paper expressing what they have gained from the project supervision experience. Entries from the journal lab managers have kept during the semester provide the foundation for the paper. In addition, lab managers are asked to critique the program. The evolution of the basic management course is directly related to the feedback received from lab managers over the years.

### PROGRAM RESULTS

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. As the program expanded, all students in the course began to participate in the labs, so some within- course comparisons became impossible.

Student evaluations of the basic course as a whole have improved from somewhat negative at the start of the program (apparently related in large part to problems with the mass lecture) to quite positive at present. Ratings of lab section managers have been high from the beginning of the program. Consistently at least 80 percent of students say their lab managers did an outstanding or very good job. A factor here is the perception that lab managers are highly supportive.

Evidence of the value of the experience to the lab managers, while somewhat "soft," nevertheless is extremely encouraging. Without exception, the 200 or so people who have been lab managers have commented in their final reports that the experience was valuable. Quite a few of the "testimonials" are extremely positive.

In looking back on my experience as a lab manager, I find it to be the single most rewarding

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experience for me here at ISU.

Being perfectly honest, I can say the high point of my education at ISU was participating in the Lab Section Manager Program.

The position as lab manager was a very rewarding experience for me.

I can say without any doubts that this has been one of the best classes I have ever taken. It taught me more about people and social interaction than any traditional course could have.

In January, I've got to admit that I had reservations about accepting the position as lab manager. Today, I firmly believe that it has been one of the best learning experiences that I've had at Illinois State.

All of these comments came from students who were lab managers in the Spring 1979 semester. Although skeptics can point out some legitimate problems with this type of evidence, the fact that these statements are made by students with excellent academic records is reassuring. Further, there are other indirect indicators of support for the program. Almost twice as many people apply for the lab manager positions as there are places available. College recruiters seem impressed. When a group of the lab managers participated in an assessment center program for a large company, company managers were highly complimentary about their performance.

In considering the degree to which the program objectives for the lab managers are being met, at this time the evidence is either testimonial or based on observations by faculty in the program. The experience clearly helps in the communications skills areas. Lab managers report progress in giving instructions and directions, in leading discussions, in picking up non-verbal cues from others, in sensing how others are reacting to them. Increased self-confidence in communications situations may be the most obvious benefit of the experience.

In the area of leadership skills, many of the lab managers say they have learned something about their own styles of operating. Faculty observe the development of more sophistication about leadership behavior. Many of the lab managers seem to progress from oversimplified democratic or directive approaches to a greater awareness of the need to adapt leadership behaviors to situational circumstances. Some get a sense of what it means to have authority, and some developed concepts such as "It's nice to have authority to fall back on, but don't use it until you need it."

One of the most frequently noted areas in the lab managers' final reports is that of performance evaluation. There seems to be a new appreciation for the problems entailed in evaluating other people, and a commitment to trying to establish meaningful criteria and to taking special care in the process.

Whether or not the lab managers develop skills in the motivating and influencing areas is difficult to assess. There does seem to be much greater awareness of individual differences and of the need to vary one's approaches when dealing with different people. In many cases the lab managers do have to struggle with problems of motivating students in the lab to participate, or to carry their weight in team projects, or to cooperate with someone they dislike. The coaching and feedback efforts made in these cases seem likely to result in improved skills.

Beyond the stated objectives for the program, lab managers report a wide variety of benefits. Some suggest they learned to apply a management process model to handling their labs. Many indicate that they have learned something about personal time management, about planning and organizing presentations, about the value of

setting personal goals. Most develop new perspectives on the instructor's role, and get some insights into both the satisfactions and frustrations of supervising. In one way or another all report increased self awareness.

Thus, in total, those who have gone through the manager experience are extremely supportive of the program. The complexities of evaluation remain. Efforts to make the program objectives more precise and measurable are underway, as are long term follow up activities. If we can accept the proposition that the experiences students get as lab managers have parallels in the work of managers, then we believe the program makes a useful contribution to management education.