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"A MODULAR APPROACH TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: CLASSROOM & CONSULTING APPLICATIONS"

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a modular approach to experiential learning. Primary emphasis is placed on the practice and potential of this 'total packaging' concept for classroom and consulting purposes. The authors of this paper take the position that experiential learning as a field is maturing, and as a consequence requires that increased attention be focused on the design and delivery of experiential learning situations.

INTRODUCTION

The experiential learning field has progressed beyond its infancy, and now must face some very real problems of "maturation". It is no longer sufficient to simply get a group of "victims" together, do a little "touchie- feelie", and call it experiential learning. Nor should the experiential approach be used as an excuse for shoddy preparation or poor course design.

One possible aid Lo "maturation" may be better packaging. Proper packaging can sell products, deliver messages, etc. which might not otherwise "be picked up" by the buyer. It is also interesting to note that packaging is most effective at the point of purchase. Our approach in this paper is to examine experiential "modules" as an alternative to the design and/or delivery of experiential materials to our potential buyers, i.e., the users of our exercises. The paper begins with an explanation of the rationale for the modular approach, and concludes with "point of purchase" examples of modules designed for classroom and consulting applications.

RATIONALE FOR THE MODULAR APPROACH TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning should be "whole person" learning [2J. It should involve the learning individual in cognitive behavioral, and affective (emotional) learning "states". The behavioral dimension, of these three, has been the easiest to abuse, and has too often been used to define experiential learning only as learning by doing".

Such "one-dimensional' approaches can result in shallow learning experiences which, importantly, leave the participant wondering what happened, i.e., in a state of "cognitive bewilderment". We feel that experiential learning must transcend one-dimensional approaches, (including "touchie-feelie"), and include significant amounts of cognitive learning. Current research indicates that this is quite possible [5].

Experiences, including the experiences of experiential learning, are always filtered through the learning individual's cognitive frame of reference. These "experienced experiences"[1] are then evaluated, categorized, and assigned meaning. Without meaningful and personally relevant experiences, an individual may have trouble in developing nature cognitions or a "relatively complete" cognitive map.

Furthermore, since one's cognitions provide basic predispositions and perceptions towards behavior(s), "whole-person" experiential learning has a very real potential for strengthening one's "real world" skills. In other words, many of the "targets" of experiential learning, such as managerial effectiveness, interpersonal competence, etc. can be realized only if the "experiential experience" is sufficiently involving and truly whole-person.

In summary, our basic rationale for a modular approach to experiential learning Is to "re-package" the experiential format. The objective is to increase the probability of producing whole-person learning in an active rather than passive learning environment.[2]

The Modular Approach in the Classroom

The typical experiential exercise begins with some sort of brief theoretical presentation followed by a one or one-and-a half hour basically behavioral experience. Our major concern with such an approach is that it limits the depth of learner- involvement.

Take, for example, the topic of communication. The assigned readings are typically confined to an explanation of a communication process model and the accompanying exercise to a demonstration of the role of feedback in that process. Neither of these (readings, exercise) are without merit. However, a great deal more may be accomplished by a more complete sequencing of readings and exercises on communication.

Our classroom communication unit is patterned after the individual change model. In the first component of this model, our students are asked to become involved in a filtering exercise without prior readings. The purpose of this exercise is to unfreeze. Overtime students can become quite complacent with reference to communication skills. They assume that a one-time exposure (in perhaps another class) is sufficient to sensitize them to the pitfalls of the communication process and they may generally believe themselves to be

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[1] These "experiences" may be direct or vicarious. For example, see Hoover, J. Duane, "Vicarious Experiential Learning: An Empirical Test".

[2] For a large scale application of this approach, see Hoover, J. Duane and Crino, Michael D. , Organizational Behavior: An Experiential Approach, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (forthcoming).

effective communicators. They must be jarred loose from such feelings of "false competence," and our filtering exercise is designed to unfreeze them and therefore accomplish this. It is conducted as follows.

Five people leave the room; after their departure a short story is read to those remaining. They are asked to write down the story as read. As the exercise continues, they are asked to pay particular attention to where distortions of fact and emphasis begin to occur.

The first person is invited back into the room and is read the same story. In advance of the story telling each of the five individuals is clearly told that it will be his or her responsibility to retell the story to the next person. The individuals are brought in one by one, and the story is repeated from person to person until the fifth person has been told the story. That person then turns and tells the class his/her "accurate" version.

Students are invariably surprised at the gross distortions that occur during this process. They begin to ask questions such as why it happened, what could have been done to avoid it, and what about the role of written communications?

They are now more ready to learn (change). Subsequent discussion of the communication model and the whole topic area of communication become more important to them.

As a means to put written communications into perspective in the next module component they are asked to answer fifteen questions (T, F, ?) with reference to an ambiguously stated situation. They are asked to read and reread the story as often as they wish. They must then answer the questions without referring back to the written passage. After they have completed the questions individually they are asked to share their responses in small groups. These groups are charged with generating a group response set for the questions. Total group discussion quickly reveals major differences of opinion as to what did and what did not happen in the story. These peer level differences of opinion (in groups) have a significant impact on their faith in written memos in particular and the challenge of communications in general.

Once again, the "vulnerability" of the communication process is underscored. They are now more ready for the module component of a lecture on the communication process. As stated before, we feel students become more involved in this process due to the unfreezing exercises.

The next module component moves to expand the simple communication model to include the psychological (emotional) content found in many communicative interactions. Students are asked to role play a supervisor/subordinate conflict role set. The roles are written with considerable emotional content. The end result is ususally a poorly constructed resolution of the conflict or polarized "un-resolvable" positions. The next step in this exercise is a rather complete analysis of what occurred in the communication episode. Emphasis is placed on the barriers built by the defensive climate which often evolves. Instruction is then provided on how to build a supportive climate through application of the ABBA model (a variant of active listening) [4].

A second superior/subordinate conflict role play is then set up. Students are asked to use the ABBA model and to be sensitive to the climate which evolves during this second role-play interaction. Students usually find the second experience more rewarding, less hostile, and generally more effective than the first. Next comes a debriefing, including student comments on the contrasts they observed and felt between the two role plays.

The last component of the classroom experiential module involves a peer level conflict role play. The intention is to demonstrate to the students significant differences between superior/subordinate and peer communication interactions. Once again students are asked to use the ABBA model. An important dimension added to the module at this point is the concept of communication climate and the benefits of a healthy, supportive, and communicative relationship. This concept serves as an integrative device, in that it ties together rather well the whole-person elements of cognitive information (lectures, models, etc.), emotional involvement and contrast (ABBA I vs. ABBA II, superior/subordinate vs. peer, etc.), and behavior (step-by-step skill practice in communication effectiveness).

Final closure of the module is accomplished by a complete debriefing of the entire multi-day exercise and the writing by each student of a reaction paper. The paper is designed to force the student to conceptualize and express his or her own integration of the cognitive, behavioral, and affective "learnings" processed during the exercise.

Modules such as this need to be of sufficient complex- to address and potentially activate all of the "whole-person" dimensions. This is especially beneficial for accomplishing "cognitive diversity" relative to a particular concept. In this case we use a sufficiently broad topic (communication) and "highlight" it cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally from several different but interrelated directions. This is what we mean by a module, and it is an equally viable alternative to more effective experiential processing of such topics as group dynamics, psychological contracting and closure, motivation training, etc.

The Modular Approach: A Consulting Application

The benefits of integrative modules are also quite relevant in "real-world" training and consulting situations. It is also important in these settings to make presentations of necessary complexity, to focus on skill development and whole-person learning, and, most important for consultant effectiveness, to not be perceived as presenting disjointed, low-level, or overly-simplistic experiential learning exercises. The description which follows is an example of packaging module components in this arena.

Component Number One: Formal Communications

The complexity of the tasks to be accomplished by coordinated groupings of resources (called "organizations") is a well documented reality. As would then be anticipated, organizations have many diverse needs whose satisfactions are necessary for the organization itself to be both effective and efficient in its goal directed behaviors. As noted by Finch et al., "one of the fundamental needs of organizations is to arrange how information gets into the possession of those individuals or groups who require it for task performance, control, problem solving, and decision making" [P.43].

An important reality for individual learners to master is that different formal communication networks can be designed and implemented. Each of these networks, however, results in unique communication patterns and

relationships. To expose our groups to some of these networks and to simultaneously provide them with an opportunity to become aware of the impacts of each, we have found an exercise from Knudson et al. [7 PP. *23-41]* to be quite valuable. This particular exercise includes the wheel, "y," all-channel, circle, and chain communication networks. Following the use of this exercise, we have found individuals to be more sensitive to the beneficial and negative effects of each formal communication network (again, "unfreezing and heightened awareness).

Component Number Two: Informal Communications

The principal intent associated with this portion of the module is to highlight the differences between formally-designed and informally-derived communication systems and messages. This is a critical learning module for, as we know, the impact of informal communication networks on organizational processes is indeed significant and pervasive.

An intriguing aspect associated with this learning area is the fact that very few experiential exercises are available to the facilitator as he/she attempts to present this portion of the complete communication module. We have, however, used one exercise with a relatively high degree of success in demonstrating informal communication channels. Called the "rumor clinic," [10, PP. 12-15] this exercise, although rather simple in its design and execution, is capable of conveying the distortions and elaborations often associated with organizational messages transmitted through informal channels. Learners now are beginning to appreciate the power of informal channels and the need to monitor and pay attention to their development and deployment.

Component Number Three: Organizational Feedback

For any individual to effectively and efficiently accomplish assigned organizational tasks, he/she must be able to both offer (give) and receive (accept) feedback from peers, superiors, and subordinates, from other organizational groups, and from himself/herself. This learning area is robust in terms of the number of available experiential exercises. While we have used many, the ones below are those in which we have a higher degree of confidence.

The "group-on-group" exercise *[9,* PP. 22-24] is very useful in terms of helping individuals to improve their process observation skills while simultaneously assisting them in learning how to provide feedback to other organizational members. In contrast to this exercise's unit of analysis (i.e., the individual), the "organizational mirror" exercise [11, PP. 78-8OJ is an excellent tool to permit groups (rather than individuals) to first establish and then explore the advantages and disadvantages associated with various avenues of feedback used among both internal groups (other departments) and external groups (customers).

The "Johari window" exercise [9, PP. 65-69] is a well-established exercise to use to provide feedback to individuals regarding themselves. Our experience with this exercise has been very positive both in terms of immediate results (i.e., during the conduct of the program itself) and long-term results (i.e. many learners have later contacted us to indicate their continued acceptance and application of this experiential tool).

Component Number Four: Interpersonal Communication

The final learning area included in our organizationally based communication module is designed to let individual learners begin to identify "barriers" which can inhibit interpersonal communication processes within an organization and "gateways" which can serve to facilitate interpersonal communications The exercise ("Interpersonal Communication" *[8* PP. 201-212]) we have successfully utilized to accomplish these objectives results in the additional benefit of helping individuals to increase both the intensity and accuracy of their listening skills.

These four components, as a total experiential module, represent an effective "presentation" of organizationally derived communications. As isolated experiences, such exercises can be perceived as 'Mickey Mouse' or irrelevant to organizational groups. As a module, the package can produce a lasting and more comprehensive learning experience.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The experiential field, if it is to continue to grow, and to mature, must face several issues: 1) The application of experiential techniques have been characterized by a lack of cognitive integration, 2) experiential practioners have not necessarily mastered the "role(s)" of experiential learning: a) "teacher", b) image with non-experiential colleagues, c) lack of integration into the larger educational system, 3) evaluation and measurement of total learning system effectiveness continues to haunt our "measured impact", especially in consulting, bottom-line applications, 4) the continuing development of our field needs a clearer focus.

The approach suggested in this brief paper is a look at better packaging of our experiential product. Modules of sufficient complexity, when well designed and integrated, can address some of the issues described above. Experiential learning remains a field ripe with potential. If we do not become complacent in our success to date, we can continue to make significant inroads into increasing the whole person learning effectiveness of our learning systems.

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