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ABSTRACT

In U.S. colleges and universities, much attention has been focused on the need to improve teaching quality and to involve students in the learning process. At the same time, many faculty members are faced with growing class sizes and with time pressures due to research demands. One useful technique is to divide the class into small groups and assign each group a project as part of the course work. Group projects force the individual student to become an active learner and can also serve as an introduction to project teams and self-directed work groups found in many businesses. These organizations have found that work teams must be trained to function effectively as a unit. An increasingly popular method of team building is experiential education, particularly outdoor adventure activities. Evaluations of such training programs suggest that program effectiveness depends on how the process of experiential training is integrated with specific organizational goals. This paper outlines a project that would design and evaluate experiential training methods to enhance the effectiveness of student groups. The first phase of the project involves the development of experiential activities appropriate for classroom use, development of a format for evaluation of group behaviors and outcomes, identification of appropriate classes for study, and development of a standard format for using experiential activities in the classroom. Later phases will involve pilot testing, modification as needed, and large scale implementation across different classes and instructors. (SV)

ENHANCING TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS USING EXPERIENTIAL TECHNIQUES: MODEL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPIRICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

A major concern in U.S. Colleges and Universities today is the quality of teaching which our student receive. While much has been said about the need to improve the quality of teaching and the importance of effectively evaluating teaching, little has actually been accomplished.

Much attention has been focussed on the concept of "active or action learning" - the idea of actively involving the student in the learning process. The use of games, simulations, case studies, discussions and classroom presentations by students have been commonly used methods of bringing active learning to the classroom. Some instructors even give students "participation points" in an effort to get every student actively involved in the learning process.

A number of other factors are complicating this push for improved teaching quality and the move for more student involvement in the learning process. Some of these factors include: the growing demand for faculty members to be both productive researchers and quality teachers; larger class sizes in many departments, with classes often having 40 or more students in them; the growing importance of computer technology as an educational tool at the same time the need for cultural diversity training is also growing; and finally, budget restrictions, which has limited the funding of new programs at many Universities. These factors have combined to trap many instructors in a cycle of wanting to enhance teaching quality, but being unable to do this simply because of the time pressures

to do more research, while teaching ever growing numbers of students.

One technique commonly used to deal with this situation is to divide the class into small project groups and to assign each group a project to complete as part of their overall course grade. By having students work in groups of three to five it is easier for the individual student to "get involved" in the learning process, and makes it much more difficult for a student to be a passive member of the class. In addition, the use of group projects by students is seen as a valid introduction to work life, since the use of project teams, and self-directed work groups is a growing phenomena in U.S. business today.

While self-directed work teams (SDT's) are commonly used by today's business organization, the need to train these teams in how to accomplish their task and how to function effectively as a unit (commonly called "team-building") is a growing function of the training department of these organizations. An increasingly popular method of training these work teams involves various forms of experiential education, including both high and low ropes forms of outdoor-based training (OBT). One need not look far to find former participants who will attest that their experience in an OBT program was highly beneficial (e.g., Long, 1987; Broderick, 1989). In addition to this anecdotal evidence, a number of empirical studies (Baldwin, Wagner & Roland, 1991; Wagner & Roland, in press) have clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of the low ropes outdoor courses in building effective work teams, in certain settings.

While many corporate managers are quickly sold on these experientially-based training programs, our research indicates that the effectiveness of these programs in enhancing work group behaviors varies from program to program (Wagner & Roland, in press). A key element in determining how effective a given program will be has been found to be the strength of the link between organizational goals and program design. In evaluating experiential programs used by a number of different organizations it is common to see one activity used by a number of different trainers. While these activities all appear to be the same, subtle differences can be seen on close examination, and it is these differences which appear to account for much of the variations in the effectiveness of these types of programs. Our conclusions are that it is <u>not</u> the process of experiential training which has produced such dramatic results, rather it is <u>how</u> that process is integrated with program objectives that will determine the effectiveness of the program.

The most effective corporate experiential programs are those in which the experiential activity and the debriefing of that activity are closely linked to a clearly established and organizationally desireable goal. Thus, for example, if increased participation of all team members in the group problem solving/decision making process is a key goal of the organization, then the experiential activities need to "force" the group to involve everyone in the group in this process. Likewise, the debriefing of the experiential activity by the program facilitator must allow the group to emphasize the value

of this participation in improving the problem solving/decision making process.

Unfortunately, while the need to train classroom groups in how to work together is every bit as great as is the need to train corporate work teams, little has been done or said in this area. The current project is designed to attempt to fill this void by developing and testing a model to enhance teaching effectiveness in the classroom through the use of experiential techniques. This project is seen as an on-going project lasting at least five to ten years. It will eventually involve a large number of researchers, and will study the use of experiential activities to enhance group performance in a variety of university activities.

The current project

The current project will involve the use of a team of scholars to design and test the impact of using experiential activities to enhance the effectiveness of student groups. These groups could represent several different areas of student life, including: class room groups; groups selected by course major (all HRM majors); student organization groups (all APICS members); groups by class (all Seniors), or a number of other possible groups.

While some types of experiential activities (i.e.; games, activities and exercises) are commonly used by many instructors as part of their class, these activities are generally used as isolated events to simply "liven up" the class, and are often not linked to any specific goal. Similarly, student organization

members report using these types of activities as "ice-breakers" at meetings early in the year.

Step 1

The first step in the current study will involve: (1) the development of a series of appropriate experiential activities for use in classroom settings; (2) the development of an improved evaluation format to include evaluations of group behaviors and group outcomes; (3) the identification of appropriate classes for the study; and (4) the development of a standard format for using these activities in a classroom setting. This last step is essential if we are going to be able to effectively evaluate the these programs across multiple settings.

The development of a series of appropriate experiential activities should be quite straightforward, since these activities have been used by some instructors in classes for a number of years. The development of a group evaluation format to include both group self evaluation measures of group behavior will be more challenging. Measures of group behaviors have been developed used extensively in other experiential training activities (Wagner & Roland, in press). Measures used in earlier studies include group awareness (clarity, cohesiveness, and homogeneity), group effectiveness, problem solving, trust and bonding.

An early goal of this study will be the need to develop an improved "group evaluation format". A common method currently used by many instructors is to have the group members evaluate the efforts of each of the group members in completing the

assigned project. For this project, a broader measure of group effort and outcomes will be needed. A project team will begin work on this part of the project very early in the project.

The identification of appropriate classes for the study will also have to be done early in the project. This will involve the identification of classes in which group projects are a key element in the learning process. Generally, this will mean that the groups are randomly assigned by the instructor to work together on a group project or projects. In some departments over 50% of the courses use some type of graded group activity as part of the course syllabus.

Finally, in order to compare the results of this study across multiple settings, it will be necessary to develop an initial format for using these activities. This would include such items as when they are used in the class (early, middle, late); how many activities are used (i.e.; 1 class, 2 classes, etc); and who facilitates these activities (do we train each instructor, or use a core of facilitators).

Step 2

The pilot testing of this program in actual classes, and the modification of this program, as needed.

Step 3

Implementation of the project on a large-scale basis using at least 20 different classes and 10 different instructors across disciplines. In addition to the "experiential project classes" additional classes not using experiential activities will be used as a control group. Step three will conclude with a full

empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of experiential activities on enhancing teaching effectiveness in classes where group activities are crucial elements of the learning process.

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