Weathering the Storms: Acknowledging Challenges to Learning in Times of Stress

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Students and faculty have had numerous disruptions this academic year with Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma developing into major stressors. During this innovative session, we will examine some of the challenges and strategies used by faculty to work with students to maintain empathy and academic rigor in times of stress and disruption, and will invite audience participation to brainstorm ways to handle this challenge in the future.

Keywords: Performance Improvement, Work-Life Balance, Blended Learning

The purpose of this session is to provide an opportunity for faculty and students to discuss ways to sustain a graduate program when disasters (natural or man-made) occur.

Symposium Methodology

This innovative session will follow a panel discussion format. HRD faculty from remote sites of the university will discuss individual challenges faced with university closings due to hurricane warnings, and resultant problems of students maintaining contact in classes while contending with losses to home and family. Faculty will discuss various types of blended or virtual learning used to maintain contact with students. Participant activities in small and large groups will strengthen rapport with faculty needing support, and should result in proactive solutions to this, and similar problems, in the future. Handouts on stress management and work-life balance will be distributed in the debriefing activity.

Goals

The goals for the session are for participants to:
1. Learn about challenges and strategies used by university faculty to maintain morale and learning experiences during hurricane season in the South Florida/Gulf Coast area.
2. Discuss and share information about additional methods of maintaining an adequate work-life balance in times of crisis.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of Human Resource Development (HRD) is to "facilitate changes that led to performance improvements, which ultimately enhance organizational competitive readiness and renewal capacity" (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000, p. 11). In this scenario, HRD faculty will analyze original plans for teaching and learning, and discuss changes made to accommodate student and faculty schedules after major hurricanes disrupted the normal routine of adult students working days and attending classes in the evening (also referred to as "The Plan").

Hayday's (2005) article on absence management explores the causes of absence (including health and lifestyle factors, workplace factors, attitudinal and stress factors, and domestic and kinship factors) and suggests ways of reducing absences in the workplace. For the purpose of this session, we are considering absence from class to follow the same strategy as absence from work. The cause of absence, in this case, would be the unexpected disruptions from our overactive hurricane season. Our theoretical model of observed and expected performance in blended learning (Figure 1) includes Lowe and Holton's (2005) conceptual model of effective computer-based instruction for adults, and Lewin's force field analysis, to illustrate the uncertainty of learning outcomes when unexpected variables (such as the hurricanes) occur.

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analysis, to illustrate the uncertainty of learning outcomes when unexpected variables (such as the hurricanes) occur. In other words, the *expected blending learning performance, or "The Plan"* would be the syllabus and the preparations undertaken before the term began. In this instance, the lower part of the model alludes to Hurricanes Rita, Katrina, and Wilman as changes or disruptions to "The Plan."

Expected Blended Learning Performance ("The Plan")

Learn-Based Inputs   *Instructor-based Inputs*
    Self-Directedness   Learning Goal Level
- Locus of Control
- Metacognitive Skills
- Motivation to Learn
Computer Self-Efficacy

Blended Learning Outcomes

Disruptions to "The Plan":
Observed Blended Learning Performance
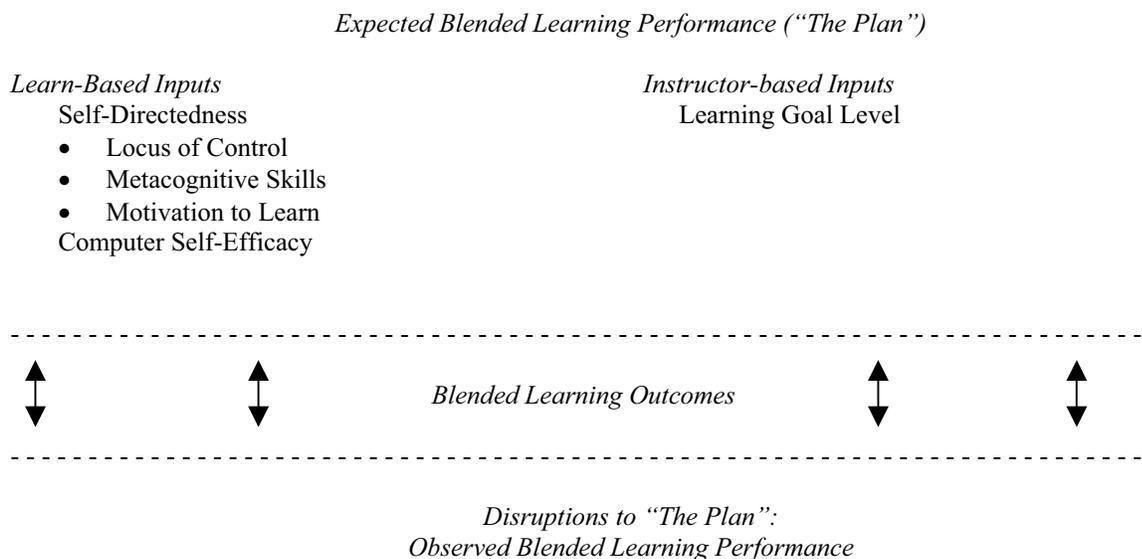
Figure 1. *Observed and Expected Performance in Blended Learning (also known as Disruptions to "The Plan."*

Blended Learning

    When communication in a face-to-face environment is disrupted, what can be done to maintain the sense of belonging in the class? Carr-Chellman (2005) discusses the use of web-based learning as aiding the isolated person and independent learner. There is no need for travel, time & money are saved, and presumably, educational goals are met. However, there are also feelings of disconnectedness. Instructors can use discussion boards, chat rooms, and other ways of reconnecting without actually being in direct contact. Problems with distance learning include students' complaints about increased feelings of isolation and may result in their eventual withdrawal from online learning programs (Rovai, 2002). Positive aspects of distance learning include using the technology to communicate and (at a higher level) mentor and coach the student when he/she is unable to come to class.

    Perhaps we can use the best features of distance or web-based learning and accommodate those students wanting face-to-face interactions by using blended learning. Heinz (2005) describes blended learning as "integration (or the so-called blending) of e-learning tools and techniques with traditional methods." Could this hybrid learning approach be useful when access is not available in either the total face-to-face or the total distance learning scenario?

Transformational Change in Times of Stress

    In times of stress, change is necessary. Cummings & Worley (2001, as stated in Swanson & Holton, 2001), state the five key characteristics of transformational change:
- Triggered by environmental and internal disruptions
- Systematic and revolutionary change in the organization, including its culture and design
- Demands a new organizing paradigm – reconfiguration of existing variables
- Is driven by senior executives and line management
- Continuous learning and change, which requires considerable unlearning and innovation.

    We can transfer each of these characteristics of change to our feelings of frustration, and our need to move forward in times of disruption. Some type of change will occur as a result of this stress-induced learning situation. Can we apply Lewin's (1951) field theory of how events are perceived as a result of this disruption in classes, and how the person will behave as a result of these driving and restraining forces affect the student, to positive change? How can we adapt to changes in "The Plan"?

Performance Improvement

Performance improvement and enhancement occurs by defining the gap between what *is* happening and what *should be* happening. Rothwell (2005) suggests finding opportunities for improving human performance. What *should be* happening is learning according to the learning contract or syllabus created at the beginning of the course. What *is* happening is what has occurred as a result of the disruption to the work (or school)//life balance. How can we use performance improvement strategies as well as HRD practitioner skills such as coaching and mentoring to maintain performance at its suggested level? On the other hand, should we adjust our expectations in times of crisis?

We believe that principles of work-life balance and stress management can ease some of the unexpected challenges encountered by adults, and lead to proactive ways of coping with life and life skills. The university is a prime example of a learning organization, and should serve the purposes outlined in Argyris's requirements of tomorrow's organizations, which are to include more creative planning, continuous and increased commitment by all involved, and Increased understanding of criteria for effectiveness that meet the challenges of complexity (Argyris, 1999). When open access is allowed between individuals and groups in a free, reliable communication, and where trust, risk-taking, and helping each other is prevalent, the best possible solution for all can be achieved (Argyris, 1999).

Table 1. *Format and Timetable (90 minutes)*

Time	Topic	Approach
10 minutes	Introductions	Ice Breaker
20 minutes	Overview of Problem and Reactive Solutions	Panel
20 minutes	Small Groups: suggestions for Proactive Solutions	Small group activity
30 minutes	Large Group: Proactive suggestions to presenters	Interaction between presenters and participants
10 minutes	Debrief experiences Followup activities	Handouts

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