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Experiential Education Format to Develop Self-Direction and Authority

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ABSTRACT: Non-traditional learners and learning environments challenge instructors to develop educational formats responsive to specific objectives and milieu. This paper outlines the theoretical foundations of one such format in the group relations work of Rioch (1975) and the operationalization of andragogical methods (Knowles, 1970, 1984). Specific competencies related to long-term goal achievement instead of short-term information retention are highlighted along with Postman and Weingartner's (1969) guidelines for curricula intended to enhance these skills. One successful educational format used in a semester long multi-subject, multi-cultural learning environment is detailed as an example of these instructional design principles.

The primary objective of traditional education is often seen as the transfer of information and skills to passive learners. Unfortunately, studies of data retention suggest that content recall fades rapidly whereas the intellectual skills of inquiry and evaluation provide longer term benefits by preparing the learner to independently determine what needs to be learned, then take initiative to meet the challenge.

Such general intellectual competencies are rarely cultivated in systematic instructional designs, yet they may be crucial to successfully meeting goals in participative, results-oriented work organizations and social groups. Some of these skills may include:

- Taking initiative in assessing learning needs pertinent to the learner's personal and occupational objectives.
- Developing self-determined activities to meet these goals.
- Taking an active part in developing a learning contract with an instructor, who is viewed as both a guide and co-learner.
- Contributing to the learning of others through active participation in discussions.
- Critically evaluating evidence and questioning authority.
- Developing opinions about information rather than merely retaining unexamined "facts."
- Cultivating discussion and leadership skills to deal with controversial topics.
- Expressing knowledge through brief, coherent, and logical written statements.
- Developing an interest in lifelong learning.

Dr. Margaret Rioch (1975) of the A.K. Rice Institute contrasted these intellectual approaches with the usual structure of a traditional learning situation when she wrote:

In most of our schools . . . students *take* courses *given* by instructors . . . It is true that a teacher sometimes needs to transmit facts and theories from the past, to tell students what to do in order to develop skills, and to present a model for imitation. But much more importantly . . . (the) function is to insist that the students take unto themselves the authority which tends to be foisted on the teacher. This can be done if the teacher refuses steadfastly to accept the authority . . . the students, the rebellious ones as well as the docile ones, will try in a thousand ways to force . . . or seduce . . . (the teacher to accept) it (pp. 175-176).

Kabuga (1984) concurred that " . . . no teacher can really teach in the sense of *making* another person learn . . . one person merely helps another person learn" (p. 256). Similarly, in the learning transactions of psychotherapy, Erickson (1976) observed that patients, like students " . . . keep pulling at the therapist (teacher) for the cure, the magic, the change, rather than looking at themselves as the change agent" (p. 27). Rogers (1951) joined Erickson in urging therapists and teachers alike to return responsibility for choice and change to the learner, and the importance of this strategy is discussed in light of countertransference in psychotherapy (Welds, 1984).

One Approach to Develop Intellectual Self-Direction

While working in a multi-cultural situation, I developed an instructional model intended to enhance each learner's capacity for self-direction and intellectual responsibility. This approach was guided by Rioch's work in group relations and Knowles' (1984) discussions of "andragogy," particularly his conviction that:

> Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it. (p. 31)

An innovative instructional format was not only appropriate but also imperative for the atypical learning situation presented during an international education semester aboard the Institute for Shipboard Education's *S.S. Universe.* At that time, the program was part of the University of Colorado's Center for Lifelong Learning, and it is now administered by the University of Pittsburgh.

Five hundred undergraduates from over two hundred universities in the U.S. and abroad were joined in the four month instructional program by nearly one hundred adults interested in continuing education for personal enrichment. More than twenty nationalities were represented and ages ranged from six months to over eighty years. In this setting, living and learning were inseparable as we inevitably shared our areas of naivete or inexperience in the eighteen ports-of-call and in shipboard briefings. This proximity made traditional power and authority differentials ludicrous, if not impossible. Consequently, an instructional format was devised to emphasize learner-directed experiences.

The Instructional Format

At first class meeting, principles derived from Postman and Weingartner's (1969) work were outlined as guidelines for approaching subject matter. In this format, "ground rules" include:

- Questioning is the instructional format.
- The teacher rarely tells the students what they "ought" to know.
- A single statement is rarely the "answer" to a question.
- Student-student interaction is stressed over student-teacher interaction.
- Instructional plans are generated from interests and needs instead of from a pre-determined "logical" structure.

Theoretical bases of the instructional format were introduced including fundamentals of andragogy (Kabuga, 1984; Knowles, 1970, 1984); shared responsibility for learning (Boud, 1980, 1984); lifelong learning (Lenz, 1982); and action learning (MacNamara, 1985; Skomp, 1985). The importance of intellectual self-reliance and critical inquiry were emphasized as an alternative to deference to the instructor's authority. Milgram's (1963, 1965) disturbing findings in his classic studies of obedience to authority as well as Rioch's (1975) analysis of teaching and learning illustrated these principles. Questioning authority and developing intellectual initiative were presented as prerequisites for personal maturity and for preserving the democratic right to open inquiry (Paul, 1983).

The experience of collaborative learning and team-building began when participants formed continuing task sub-groups to develop panel presentations during the first session. Each group drew lots to determine a topic area based on the outline of subject areas covered during

the semester. This activity had the added value of immediate involvement in a broadly-structured task and of introducing participants to one another at the beginning of class. Each team's presentation was designed to answer the following questions:

- Why would anyone be interested enough in this topic to study, research, and write about it?
- What is worth remembering about this topic?
- What about this topic would interest your friends or intelligent lay people?
- How can you present it in a way that is interesting, innovative, and memorable?

Panelists were encouraged to use expert consultants, guest speakers, and varied formats like role-playing, videotapes, artwork, game shows, panels, interviews, and field trips. Presentations were evaluated by the listeners, who provided written, signed comments on the following points:

- How well did the panel answer the four guideline questions?
- How and how much did the presentation contribute to your learning?
- What features of the presentation were most significant and memorable?
- What grade would you assign to the panel as a team?

The final evaluation was an average of the participants' responses, with the instructor's assessment counting no more than any other learner's.

Each session opened with a thought-provoking quote from a text or relevant source. Participants were asked to comment, discuss, evaluate, critique, speculate in writing. This exercise was designed to sharpen critical thinking through taking an intellectual position and presenting a meaningful written argument with limited information and time. This work was evaluated by the instructor for clarity, coherence, relevance, logic, evidence of thought and speculation, and papers received suggestions for improvement. They were read twice and graded in relation to one another, "on a curve," and students had the option of replacing the lowest evaluation with the mark on self-designed supplementary projects.

During the second half of the semester, the written exercise was replaced by practice in discussion groups, intended to develop group cooperation, leadership, and presentation skills while reinforcing the team experience. Groups met for ten minutes to develop a three

minute reply to the opening quote, then one group was selected at random to lead a class discussion for ten minutes.

During each class, learners were asked for critical feedback of the instructional format, questions about subject content and suggestions for writing exercises. This format allowed rapid, responsive modifications in instructional design based on class need, competence, and interest.

Progress was recorded in many small increments, offering a more comprehensive approach than single evaluations of large efforts like term papers or final examinations. Participants wrote evaluations of their own progress at the program's midpoint and end, complete with a suggested grade. The final evaluation was an average of:

- The learner's self-assessments.
- Panel presentation evaluation.
- Attendance.
- Participation as evaluated by all participants.
- The instructor's evaluation.
- Written exercises and discussion leading, eliminating the lowest performance.
- Any additional or make-up projects.

This format was well-received by students and was recognized by administrators for its innovation and suitability to intercultural and adult education contexts. Most participants admitted initial confusion and annoyance, as predicted by Rioch (1975) and Erickson (1976), but felt that they had begun to acquire a variety of previously undeveloped intellectual skills. The model encourages participant responsibility, decision-making, and direction in determining the course of learning. It is useful in diverse settings with non-traditional authority relationships in which instructor and learner are allies in the instructional effort. The educator seeking to assist learners in developing self-direction and authority is guided by a philosophy similar to that expressed by psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck (1977):

> I am not inviting you to follow me, but to follow yourself. I am only here to help you if you need me (p. 2).

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