

THE EXPERIENCE OF SETTING UP A NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENT MODEL IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND FRUSTRATIONS

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to describe and to reflect on the experience of the authors in setting up a new model of learning environment in management education in a University in Brazil, which was initially called Management Practice Laboratory (MPL). The MPL environment was conceived as a physical and conceptual space where students could learn and practice the principles and techniques of working in organizations in its three levels: operational, tactical and strategic. The foundations of our project comes from social constructivist perspective on learning (Vygotsky, 1978), from experiential learning literature (Kolb, 1984) and from researches that calls for a new epistemological ground in management learning (Hounsell and Entwistle, 2005). In this paper, we will stress the challenges and the frustrations we had with the project since these could be helpful to those interested in initiatives similar to ours. The major challenges we faced were: a) to build the legitimacy of the project; b) to engage partners in the project; and c) to understand student's motivation both as an individual and as a team member in the project. We also faced some difficulties that we could not overthrow. We will only mention two of these difficulties: a) the classic theory-practice academic dualism; and b) the lack of infrastructure to support the project. We conclude that there is room to innovation in the way one teaches and learns on management in Universities since one shows courage to overcome the challenges and frustrations one will certainly deal with.

Keywords: experiential learning, learning environments, management education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the experience of the authors on setting up a learning environment model in management education at the Department of Management and Accounting in a Federal University in Brazil. We had no intention to be only tutors in the project. Therefore, we immersed ourselves in the experience as participant observers, as educators and as clients of the experience. Thus, we load the text with enthusiastic “we”s. We initially called the project Management Practice Laboratory (MPL) although we now perceive the inadequacy of the term: neither management nor laboratory. We defined this learning environment as a holistic physical and conceptual environment to learn and practice useful skills in the three levels of organizations: the operational, the tactical and the strategic. We believed that such learning environment would improve student’s attitudes not only as professionals but also personally as team members and citizens. As we will make clear throughout the text, we advocate our beliefs in a passionate way.

The model was conceived as a two layer environment: a) at one level as a *physical site*, a space and, b) at another level as a conceptual framework that we will mention as a *virtual country*. As a physical site we understood the project not only as a facility where students would attend to and practice skills but also as “a product and a precondition of all our practices and engagements etc. to the construction of the relations between us, to the blossoming, or not, of identities and to the potential for new futures that we are constantly laying down.” (Massey, 2004, p. 1). As a virtual country we understood the project as a means of structuring meaningful learning situations and the arrangement of *andragogic* activities (Knowles, 1990). Both layers would be interwoven with the physical structure providing the infrastructure where a planned micro social environment would take place. These activities would resemble reality allowing participants to experience work in organizations, by planning them, working on their daily routines and controlling the outcomes. These characteristics are near - but not equal - to the concepts in literature like “natural learning” (Armstrong, 2011) and “real-world learning” (Bilimoria, 1998).

We took a constructivist perspective as our starting point. From a constructivist perspective we meant that ‘meaning’ was the main construct we aimed students would gain from the learning experience. We believed university students present the six characteristics of adult learners as advocated by Knowles (1990): a) they need to know why they are learning before they embark on learning; b) they need to feel responsible for their own decisions; c) they had a stock of relevant experiences where they could retrieve from; d) they come to the experience with a readiness to learn; so timing is important to them; e) they learn best in real-life situations; f) they work best through internal motivation not external impositions. We also supported our efforts on experiential learning literature (Kolb, et al., 1984) and in the view that learning occurs in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

2. THE DREAM – OUR MOTIVATION AND EXPECTATION

We (the two authors) seemed to share the same pedagogical beliefs, for instance, the need for bridging the gap between in-class academic knowledge and practice required by the job market. We argued that students learning in a simulated environment with close supervision by tutors would envisage better how the world of work functions. With students’ immersion in the learning environment, we believed in the flourishing of students’ implicit knowledge. Concomitantly, we hoped to shorten distance between tutors and students. The proximity with

students in the practicum could help tutors understand better what boost students learning and what makes them turn into competent professionals and better human beings.

We foresaw many challenges on the way as well. Due to shortage of resources we hoped a very tough beginning. However, we dreamed of a very stimulating and meaningful learning environment; one in which students would finish with a sense of having experienced “reality”. The students’ journey through the learning environment would be more intensive what, in our view, would lead to a less extensive time within the university. Therefore, this would benefit also the university with an increased rate of efficiency. Moreover, we believed that such learning environment could also be valuable to our department. In addition, we envisaged an opportunity - aside the benefits for students, department and university - to learn together. The trade-off between hard work and satisfaction seemed favorable. With this load of dreams and expectations we started up the project. Simple as that!

3. IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT AND LEARNING BY EXPERIENCE

We offered two classes of the project: the first in the second semester of 2009 thereafter called class 1 and the second in the first semester of 2010 thereafter called class 2. The project was offered as a sixty-hour elective discipline with two-hour-two-meetings per week. In class 1 we had forty-five students who divided themselves into five groups constituting the companies of Simuland. The students were from Management, Accounting and Production Engineering courses. We had many difficulties in class 1. Firstly, there were more students than we could handle and with no adequate space we had to improvise many activities. We had to allocate some students in the government because they did not match any group. This was an unexpected but providential happening because government was overloaded with work. We had difficulties in assessing students. Since marking was mandatory and we had no previous assessment criteria we decided to mark students equally. One student contested, suggesting she had committed too much to be equalized with others. Some students failed because they did not show up the meetings.

In class 2, we decided to focus and limited students to twenty. Students attending classes in this semester were from the Management and Accounting courses only. On our request, they divided themselves into two companies. Thus it was much easier. We constrained the products or services the two companies could offer by creating a list of demands. These demands came from teachers and committees in our department. We changed the assessment process, now creating some specific criteria based on company’s finance, accounting and quality performance. We soon perceived the large gap between the ideal and the actual situation we had. For instance, we soon perceived the difficulties of offering a one-semester two-hour two-meeting per week discipline. In class 1 with so many students we were not able to make them grasp the meaning of the differentiated learning environment. In class 2, there was a great improvement, we consider, but still miles away from our requisites.

4. REFLECTING ON THE EXPERIENCE

In this section we aim at reflecting on the experience and why we failed. As Kaye and Hawkrigde (2003) explains promising innovations fails for many reasons, “the champions leave, the original funding ends, the rules change, the course or module is dropped, demand falls away, the novelty fades, nobody wants to make the extra effort needed, and so on” (p. 15). None of these seems to be the case in our project. Here we reflect on two factors we

neglected that made us fail. What we want to do is call attention to some elements of context and their influence in experiential learning.

4.1. Challenges

Innovative projects are challenging. Ours would not be different. Bilimoria (1998) states that experiential learning challenges are twofold: pedagogical and institutional. Institutional challenges refer to how the innovation will be inserted into the existing educational system. In general, institutions are not prepared to integrate and deal with these perturbing events which disrupt their routine. The questions to be answered here are: “how should institutions train teachers to initiate and structure real-world learning? What technological and other supports do management educators need for effective teaching from a real-world learning perspective and who will provide these?” (p. 268). All these questions were pertinent to our project. Nevertheless, in this paper, we want to stress on one institutional challenge we faced: a) the construction of the legitimacy of the project.

The Construction of the Legitimacy of the Project

The first major challenge of the project was to construct the legitimacy of the project both to the institution as well as to the students. By the legitimacy of the project we meant not only to get a license from the institution to offer the activity to the students but also to get the resources and help we needed from the institution and peers. From the students we needed the legitimacy of being offering something useful to them. Adam et al. (2003) argue that *academic drift*, that is, the tendency of faculty “to recruit scholars that contribute to enhance their own reputation” (p. 18) is one major characteristic of academic world. We also could add that academic drift leads to *academic rust* as well, that is, the tendency of academics to stick to institutionalized procedures in a way that erodes innovation. The general rule seems to be: to be accepted one needs to accommodate the innovation to the standard process and in so doing this kills the innovation. In our project, the process of erosion began with initial approvals. Many faculty members initially did not understand the project. They thought it as an interdisciplinary course which could be offered adapting available resources to a different purpose. Even interdisciplinary courses, much simpler in their scope, suffer from the same difficulties. Pharr (2000, in Ducoffe et al., 2006), for example, describes the foundations to a successful interdisciplinary course: “(a) sufficient resources (time, effort, and money), (b) commitment of all constituents, (c) scheduling and other flexibility, and (d) a mission statement, faculty development and hiring practices, and reward systems that support the integrated curriculum” (p. 280). Even with adequate support, the construction of the legitimacy of a new project may take years to happen.

4.2. Frustrations

Bissel (2004) states that “teachers whose role conceptions are more complex (i.e., non-traditional) are often unable to fully realize, experience, or implement all desired aspects of their work due to a number of factors” (p. 28). Clark and Peterson, 1986 (in Bissel, 2004), suggest that, among others, “mandated curriculum materials, resources, time available, habits and student abilities” (p. 28) may inhibit a congruence between teachers’ state role conception and their actual classroom practices. That was our experience which led us to a feeling of frustration. After one and a half year of preparation and implementation we had a clear feeling of dissatisfaction: that was not what we had dreamt of. Below we would like to comment on

one particular facet of our dissatisfaction: the persistent dissonance between theory and practice.

The Persistent Dissonance between Theory and Practice

Simon (1964) and Schön (1983) alert to the difficulty of integration between theory and practice in professionals schools when they are placed into Universities. There, professional schools, including management schools, need sorting out the conflict between an academic orientation (management as a discipline) and a practical orientation (management as practice). On the one hand, those who favor the former orientation tend to consider management as science (even when they mention it as applied science). On the other hand, those who favor management as practice tend to consider management as artistry. It follows a series of conflicts, e.g., between analysis vs. synthesis and cause-effect relationships vs. plan of action. Simon (1964) notes that “the goal of the pure scientist is to explain phenomena in nature: the laws of physics, of physiology, or of consumer behavior ... The goal of the practitioner is to devise actions, or processes, or physical structures that work – that serve some specified purpose” (p. 212). Students detect the conflicts, we suppose, even unconsciously. Moreover, they are affected by them. In our project, our discursive emphasis on practice and the constraints of the real activities were clearly perceived as conflicted by students. What is most important? The discourse or the constrained real-world? This only made students confused and, at the end, we noticed, the real-world prevailed.

This dissonance between theory and practice is expressed in others forms as well. For instance, we do not deny students are captivated by a good traditional lecture or presentation and that memory has a special role in learning. Nevertheless, as put by Drucker (1984) management is task, not knowledge. Knowing to recite the phases of the decision making process does not turn a person into an effective decision maker. Furthermore, this dissonance is present in faculty themselves as, for example, when planning teachers do not matter in planning their courses or Human Resources teachers do not concern of designing, even informally, an assessment plan for their assistants. And so on. What is the implicit learning derived from these lessons?

In summary, we were frustrated in our experience because we only scratched these important issues. Most of our time we were busy with basic questions like time schedules, lack of resources and venue where to allocate students; and could not pay attention and go further about these essentials Definitely, that was not our intention!

5. PROVISIONAL CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, we were shocked with our “ignorance zone” which is broader than we had imagined. From the experience we could not say whether or what students have learned, what made an impact on their future performance or even if they found the experience meaningful. This immense pool of ignorance sprouted up, I suppose, partially because we were drowned in the messy of two opposed pedagogies: the traditional and the experimental.

Secondly, we were amazed by the degree of importance motivation has to students’ learning. Not only is the intensity of motivation different but also the essence of it. Here motivation should not be understood in a traditional way, as a reward market but as something coming from inside, a desire to be in, to take part, to throw oneself into the experience. Unlike

traditional learning where one can be a passive listener, experiential learning is only possible with the active participation of student in the situation.

Thirdly, we had to recognize the contradictions between our demands in the project and the formal curriculum students were subjected to in our department. We tried to ignore or, at least, minimize the importance of the “learning milieu” and the hidden curriculum. We failed. The constraints imposed by the institution rules were silent but mandatory.

In summary, we clearly understood at least three lessons from the experience: a) the need of support and credibility from the institution where one is steeped in; b) the inefficacy of mixing experiential learning methods with the traditional learning environment students are accustomed; and c) the importance of adequate space on the process of education.

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