The precepts of Part B:

• Relate to the particular outcome expectations of FDL provision, including e-modes, from a student’s point of view.

• Are grouped by – delivery, learner support, and assessment of students.

• Are supported by explanations of the reasoning behind them.

The revised code takes a fresh look at collaborative and FDL arrangements, but it retains the key principle that such arrangements, wherever and however organised, should widen learning opportunities without prejudice to:

• The academic standard of the award, and

• The quality of the provision that is offered to students.

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Learning by doing

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Introduction

In common with most – if not all – disciplines at undergraduate level, psychology is very heavily driven by theory. To use Piagetian terminology, (1936) it is important that students both accommodate and assimilate that theory. That is, they should be able to understand it fully, rather than simply being able to repeat it following rote learning of the major points. Additionally, the emphasis of Psychology at MMU Cheshire is upon both acquiring understanding of, and developing the ability to apply Psychology. In order to facilitate more effective learning and teaching of the very many psychological theories, psychology lecturers at MMU Cheshire have striven to devise creative, experiential learning experiences. One example of such a session was presented by two psychology lecturers at MMU Cheshire’s first Learning and Teaching Conference in September 2003. This paper reports that session.

Experiential Learning

There have been many critics of experiential learning since Kolb and Fry (1975) and Kolb (1976) first espoused its potential. It is not the remit of this paper to explore such critiques. Rather, experiential learning is noted here simply as a context for the form of learning to be discussed. As Borzak (1981:9) noted experiential learning involves a “direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than simply thinking about it.” That is, students were facilitated to ‘learn by experiencing’ rather than simply sitting listening and at the Learning and Teaching conference, colleagues were similarly enabled.

Background to the presentation

One of the level 1 units followed by undergraduate students on the Joint Honours Programme is Social Psychology. Part of this unit explores the nature, structure and function of groups. Part of this exploration is a brief introduction to Leadership. The teaching staff decided that an effective and creative way to facilitate students’ learning and understanding of the theories of styles of leadership would be to experience the effects of those different styles. To this end, students were divided into groups of six. One student from each group was chosen by the lecturer to be the leader of the group. The remaining five students were group members. Each group was given a pack containing fifteen straws, fifteen paperclips and five rubber bands. The group was also given a set of instructions, which informed them that they were to build a tower, which would be assessed for both effective structure and aesthetic quality. The leader of each group was given a separate set of instructions. These informed the leader as to the style of leadership they should adopt. Three different styles of leadership were then experienced by different groups.

Group 1 had a Laissez-faire leader; group 2 had an Authoritarian leader and group 3 had an Authoritative/democratic leader. (Lipitt & White, 1943) The group members were unaware of the style of leadership the group leader had been instructed to adopt. The exercise has been used for large classes of 70 students and also for smaller classes of 18 students. (In the large class there were several group 1s, 2s and 3s.)

This exercise was followed by a lecture on the topic of leadership to provide a theoretical underpinning to the knowledge obtained from the experiential exercise. The lecture addressed the major theories of leadership and discussed the issue of leadership personality (Stodgill, 1948; Mann, 1959; Wright, 1996). An investigation of models of leadership was provided detailing the consideration and initiative structure dimension of leadership. Fiedler’s
(1978) contingency theory was explored with consideration of leadership style and situational favourableness. A situational theory of leadership was described (Hersley-Blanchard 1993), suggesting to students other influences on the effectiveness of leadership. Styles of leadership (Lippit & White, 1943) were described enabling students to identify the leadership styles adopted by their leaders within the exercise and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches. The rationale for placing the exercise before the lecture is that students are required to use the theoretical understandings presented within the lecture to reflect upon their personal experiences of leadership. If the students were to experience the lecture prior to the exercise this would shape and could alter their experience of the exercise. Participating in the exercise prior to the lecture provides a more natural experience and allows for much greater reflection post lecture.

Lecturer participation at the Learning and Teaching Conference

The exercise on Leadership was undertaken by ten colleagues. As the number of was small, it was decided to use just the Authoritarian and Laissez-faire styles of leadership as these provided the two extremes of leadership style. Due to the constitution of the group which was heavily male-centred, with female members holding senior management positions in MMU Cheshire, two male lecturers were chosen to be group leaders. Using just two groups meant that each group contained a leader and four other members. Following the initial embarrassment at being asked to participate in a practical exercise, the activity progressed well. As with the students’ participation, there was much laughter and noise from the staff. Both groups succeeded in making a tower from the equipment provided, though the process of tower building, the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the group members and the ability of the leaders to remain ‘in role’ were all very different.

The group with the laissez-faire leader was very slow to commence the activity. All group members sat looking at each other, apparently waiting for their leader to direct them. Eventually, when it became clear that the ‘leader’ was not attempting to direct the activity, a group member, with quite a senior management position in MMU, took charge. Subsequently, the tower was built successfully. Feedback at the end of the activity revealed the frustration felt by the group members at the lack of direction adopted by the leader. Interestingly, as the leader continued the laissez-faire approach, the members of the group began moving their chairs to exclude him. By the end of the exercise, the leader was completely isolated. When discussing this after the activity he group members were genuinely surprised at their behaviour. All physical isolating of the leader had apparently been activated on a subconscious level.

The group with the authoritarian leader began the activity in good spirits but very quickly withdrew good humour and good-will as the leader directed the activity forcefully. Perhaps in response to this, the leader gradually stepped back from forceful direction of activity and subsequently, the exercise became increasingly democratic.

Feedback from group members revealed that there was initial confusion and irritation when the leader attempted to be authoritarian and much more cooperation once he stepped back from this approach. At the end of the exercise, the leader of the group stated that he felt very uncomfortable adopting an authoritarian approach as this was alien to his normal practice. Hence, he was unable to adopt this role for the duration of the exercise. Non-verbal communication with the leader during the exercise demonstrated that when he was adopting an authoritarian approach, little eye-contact was made with him by group members. Verbal exchanges also were short, curt and dismissive. However, once he became more democratic, non-verbal communication between him and group members became more convivial and co-operative. Additionally, laughter and good humour were introduced.

Following the exercise colleagues, like students, were asked to consider the following questions, responses to which initiated the discussion.

- What did you feel about the leadership provided by yourself/ your leader?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of the style of leadership adopted for the task you were given?
- What sort of style do you think the leader adopted?
- What have you learned about leadership?
- What type of leader do you think you are?

Students are required to reflect upon these questions, together with others from other exercises, in a Learning Journal which forms part of the assessment for the unit. The Learning Journal requires them to report the title, aims and design of the exercise together with their personal reflection on the topic being studied and also what effect the learning has had on their personal development.

Colleagues provided positive feedback about this exercise and recognised the rationale for its use and the benefits of such experiential learning for students. In addition the ability to utilise experiential learning across different disciplines was discussed. Colleagues also expressed surprise at their initial reactions and subsequent involvement in the exercise. This personal reflection is an expected part of the unit and produces personal learning to complement and extent the theoretical and practical learning resulting from the unit.

Feedback from students

Student feedback on the exercises is good. Occasionally a student will report initial feelings of embarrassment, but usually such feelings are fleeting. More usually, students report a significant learning experience both in terms of understanding theory, but also personal development learning.
Feedback from the staff who participated in the exercise at the Learning and Teaching conference was also positive.

Typical comments from students are given below.

• I looked back at the journal and realised how domineering I was and I tried not to talk so much the next week.
• I thought this would be easy, but it’s not! I have learned more personally on this unit than any other.
• The exercise on self-presentation taught me more than any lecture could have

(students were asked to dress for this class in clothing that they would not normally be seen in)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exercises provide a stimulating and ‘different’ approach to learning and teaching. Obviously, it is vital to ground the exercises in theory, but students appear to remember the theory more clearly and thoroughly when they have undertaken the associated activity than when the session has been lecture-based. It is acknowledged that not all topics lend themselves to experiential learning and teaching activities. However, the success of such exercises suggest that if appropriate, such creative learning and teaching might be one useful tool.

References


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