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## AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH FOR TEACHING QUALITY MANAGEMENT

David G. Hollingworth, University of Minnesota  
Susan A. Chesteen, University of Utah

### ABSTRACT

One example of how experiential learning is being used in the classroom is the Quality Management course for MBA students at the University of Utah. The goal of the course has been to provide a link between education and work experience by moving students beyond lectures, cases, and computer simulations into a "real-world setting". This paper documents the instructional mode of the course, reveals useful aspects of the teaching strategy used, and exposes questions to be examined.

### INTRODUCTION

The improvement of quality in products and services has become an important effort in recent years. To ensure that the educational emphasis on quality improvement continues in the 1990's, business educators need to develop more creative ways of providing students with meaningful learning experiences. Quality Control/Management is sometimes taught from a theoretical perspective for quantitative problem solving with emphasis on statistical techniques. One disadvantage of this method is that students seldom have the opportunity to gain insight into the complexity of quality management. A second problem is that many students lack the statistical competence and sophistication to the degree, which is essential for practical performance.

To achieve educational excellence in the 1990's, students will need experiences, which reflect reality. When a student applies theories-in-action (Argyris and Schon, 1977) to situations, comes to terms with inconsistencies, and deals with questions of effectiveness in practical settings, this is an example of a theories-in-use application.

### STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE COURSE

The underlying pedagogy includes a variety of teaching methods with the primary emphasis being placed on a field-base project. Lectures are given on topics directly related to statistical quality control. GEOs, presidents, and quality assurance managers from organizations are invited as speakers to contribute both ideas and materials. Further support is provided by texts, reprints of articles, videotapes, and plant tours. Students are introduced to quality control applications software such as QSOM and SAS-QC. The focus of the course is a field-based project, which is designed to give students "hands-on" experience in a "real-life" situation. Teams of students are instructed to act as consultants for a particular organization.

During the second half of the course, emphasis is given to the projects, especially to specific problems, which arise as a part of each team's consulting efforts. During the first week of class an overview of the project is presented including the organizational structure, history, and a synopsis of the major

"quality" management problems as perceived by the organization's director. Consultant teams composed of 5 to 6 members are formed and then allowed to identify which issues they wish to address. Final approval of their proposals is granted by the instructor.

### ADVANTAGES AND POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OF THIS PEDAGOGY

Experiential learning is a logical step in educating advanced students. It is a natural bridge between the formal learning experience and actual application in the business world. After studying theory, cases, and computer simulations, students want to solve larger problems and address more complex issues. This type of experience affords them the opportunity to apply the theories they have studied in a relatively low risk environment. This pedagogy can produce deeper learning and involvement in students. Since field-based projects take place in a dynamic environment unlike the stable classroom settings, "surprises" occur as a natural part of the learning experience and challenge students with additional opportunities for learning. Students are allowed to develop and practice skills in specific and/or general topic areas. During their field-based "on the job training" students integrate and apply tools and skills in a context conducive to solving real problems. Another advantage is that students who have participated in this type of experience are more prepared to enter and begin contributing to the business community.

Some problems may be encountered when this teaching method is used. One problem is related to the minimal amount of structure given to the project in the problem definition and solution process. Learning how to cope with a lack of structure is an integral part of the experiential learning that occurs when a field-based methodology is used. Time limitations pose yet another problem, especially if the course is being taught on a quarter system. Frequently teams will choose a project with a scope, which is too large for the time available. The potential for disruption in the organization poses a serious threat to the successful utilization of field-based consultation. Agitation of the organization's normal operations may occur when the balance between labor and management is altered by the presence of external "consultants", especially when the "consultants" have been allowed access to the organization by management.

While there may be valid reasons why field-based experiential learning supported by other teaching methods cannot be used for particular courses, the opportunity for this type of learning experience should be provided to more students at the graduate level.

### REFERENCES

Argyris, C. and D.A. Schon (1977), Theory in Practice, (San Francisco: Bass).