

Searching for Leadership: Application of Leadership Theory through Orienteering

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Introduction/Background

Experiential education is defined as “a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values (Association of Experiential Educators, n.d., What is experiential education?). In experiential education, students are provided with an opportunity to explore and create knowledge regarding a certain concept themselves instead of being instructed about it. In addition, true experiential education must involve a reflection component. In fact, the reflection piece is critical; it aids in the development of new skills, attitudes, theories or ways of thinking (Kraft & Sakofs, 1988).

Outdoor education is one form of experiential education. In fact, it has been described as a method of experiential learning that utilizes all the senses (Priest, 1990). However, the concept of outdoor education is not new. Since the early 1900s, educators have recognized the value of educational settings in which students can learn and discover on their own. As early as 1943, L.B. Sharp touted the value of outdoor education with the following statement:

That which ought and can best be taught inside the classroom should there be taught, and that which can best be learned through experience dealing directly with native materials and real life situations outside the school should there be learned (p.363).

Indeed, using the outdoors and natural environment is often a way to engage students in learning. Neill (2003) expounded on that belief by describing outdoor education as a way to engage small groups of people, under the direction of a facilitator or leader, in adventurous personal growth activities. Students involved in experiential learning practices “are engaged intellectually,

emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic (Association of Experiential Educators, n.d., What is experiential education?). Rohnke (1989) also identified that adventure component of outdoor education initiatives, citing the effectiveness of such activities in helping to develop team and group skills in both youth and adults.

In effort to capitalize on the benefits of experiential learning, while utilizing the natural environment available, a group-based orienteering exercise was developed for use in a graduate level Agricultural Education course at the University of Missouri. During the Summer 2006 semester, this exercise was conducted, involving a total of 12 students enrolled in a course titled, Program Leadership and Administration. The three-week course in leadership addressed topics such as leadership characteristics and traits, leadership styles, situational leadership, stages of team development and group dynamics. As a culminating application of knowledge learned, a group orienteering exercise provided students the opportunity to personally experience leadership theories and concepts discussed in class.

The activity was inspired, in part, by the use of a compass as a metaphor for values in the book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” (Covey, 1989). In that book, Covey described how well-defined personal values provide consistent guidance as a person navigates through life, just as a compass provides a person with the direction of travel during a journey. In the class, the metaphor was expounded upon to include the map and location markers to represent objectives and benchmarks to be reached as a person works toward achieving goals.

How It Works

Following instruction and class activities related to relevant topics, students were randomly assigned to groups of three or four. In preparation for the orienteering experience the

groups completed a series of team development activities and were provided instruction in orienteering. The activity took place at a local state park with an orienteering course laid out and maintained by the state department of conservation. Each group was provided with a topographical map identifying the orienteering course, an instruction sheet listing the control points to be located by the group and a compass. Each group was instructed to locate a total of six control points of varying levels of difficulty.

Immediately following the orienteering exercise, a celebration lunch was provided by department faculty at the park. During the luncheon, the course instructor facilitated a discussion in which students reflected upon their personal experiences in relationship to leadership concepts and theories learned in class. Specific situations and challenges that arose throughout the orienteering exercise were examined and connected with course content. The thoroughness with which this activity was discussed enhanced its value to students and made the application more relevant.

Results to Date

Based on the reflective conversation conducted at the conclusion of the activity and written feedback provided by students, it was concluded that this activity was educationally effective as well as recreationally enjoyable. Specific comments received from students included:

- “The orienteering exercise was a good leadership and team exercise because it allowed natural leaders to emerge and a team to develop through the course of the activity. In regard to leadership, in a class of many strong leaders, each member of the team had an opportunity to find an aspect of leadership, or a certain trait perhaps, to contribute to the group. Team development began before the orienteering, in class as the teams were formed for the first time. The natural progression of team development continued throughout the experience.”
- “While it was hard to believe we were receiving graduate credit while walking around in the woods, the application of this activity and the discussions of leadership that followed proved that this was an effective activity, and one of the most useful applications of this course.”

- “I felt like the activity was very effective. As a group we demonstrated many of the leadership traits which we discussed in class, including communication when determining the best path to take, cooperation in making decisions, encouragement and motivation when someone made a good decision or found a marker, and loyalty to the group and our cause.”
- “I believe the orienteering experience was a great application of what we have been learning in class. During the actual orienteering we did not consider what our leadership styles were or the traits each of us possessed but when it was time to reflect we were able to look back and see all of these things and how they changed based on the situation.”

This activity will continue to be utilized in the Program Leadership and Administration graduate course. Additionally, with slight modifications, this activity may be used in an undergraduate leadership course in the future.

Conclusions/Recommendations

One of the advantages of orienteering, in comparison to other outdoor education opportunities, is that it is relatively inexpensive. Depending upon available community resources and potential partnerships, the cost of such an activity can be minimized greatly. By working with members of local civic groups, youth organizations and environmental foundations, many items could potentially be borrowed. Specifically, Boy Scout Troops or non-profit foundations which support state parks seem to be extremely valuable resources.

The total cost incurred for this activity was approximately \$75.00. In order to provide sufficient equipment and materials for each group, it is recommended to allot one compass and map per group of three to four students. For this particular graduate course activity, three compasses were purchased at a local department store (\$12.00) and three maps were purchased from Rock Bridge State Park (\$5.00). In addition, funds were allocated (\$60.00) for a celebration luncheon held in conjunction with the reflection activity. While the luncheon activity would not be a requirement of such an experiential experience, it allowed an opportunity for an extended reflection period and enhanced the team-building efforts of the course.

The success of this activity reiterates the importance of incorporating a variety of instructional methods into courses of higher education. Further, since the group of students involved in this experience had fairly extensive prior experience in leadership education because of their FFA involvement, the orienteering exercise served an innovative means to address important leadership concepts. None of the students had extensive orienteering experience.

Although leadership can be taught in many ways, the “learning by doing” mentality of experiential education seems to be especially effective (Dewey, 1938; Rohnke, 1989). In fact, an ancient Chinese Proverb reiterates that mentality... *“Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will understand”* (Association of Experiential Educators, n.d., What is experiential education?). There is no doubt that the 12 students enrolled in the University of Missouri’s Program Leadership and Administration course thoroughly understand the leadership concepts they learned and applied in the summer of 2006. The experiences they had while “Searching for Leadership” will certainly stay with them for years to come.

References

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