

# **National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia**

## **Flexibility: Pathways to participation**

Refereed papers from the  
NAEEA Conference  
27 – 29 November 2013  
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Australia

Westrenius , A. (2013). Integrating management theory and academic skills to empower enabling students – a practical approach.

In Proceedings of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia Conference; Flexibility: Pathways to participation, Melbourne, Australia, 27-29 November, 2013. Accessed from <http://enablingeducators.org/conference/2013.html>

Published 2013 by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, C/- Open Access College, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, 4350

This paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and sub-themes, originality, quality and presentation. Following review and acceptance, this full paper was presented at the NAEEA conference.

Copyright © 2013 NAEEA Inc. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act, 2005, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms and licenses issued by the copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers at the address above.

# **Integrating management theory and academic skills to empower enabling students – a practical approach**

Annika Westrenius

University of Newcastle

Annika.Westrenius@Newcastle.edu.au

*Business Organisation and Management (BOM) is a course in the Open Foundation program at University of Newcastle, offered in two modes: part-time over two semesters and intensive over one semester. The intensive course also accepts students who have completed first semester in the University's Newstep program. The intensive course offering therefore has a mix of students 17 years and older, while the part-time course consists of students over the age of 20 years. The course is designed to prepare a highly heterogeneous student cohort for further study at undergraduate level. With a focus on business and management, much of the material covered in the course is based around students developing skills in subject areas such as planning, motivation, decision-making, leadership, managing teams, communication, change management and organisational learning. This subject matter is presented as theoretical knowledge and as practical skills not only relevant to academic success at undergraduate level but also in the general business environment. Academic skills such as research, critical thinking and academic oral and written communication, are also integrated and developed as part of business and management knowledge.*

## **The students**

Typical of an enabling student cohort, students come from diverse backgrounds, with a higher than average intake of students from a low socio-economic background. A significant proportion of students are 'first in family' to enter the university environment. The diverse age group means that students are in different stages of development of 'self'. Many are impacted by external factors, such as the need to work and the pressure of competing expectations from family and friends unfamiliar with the demands of university study.

### **A practical approach**

Because the students are not only demographically diverse but also possess varying levels of previous learning and maturity, I look for ways to connect with them individually, to 'find them wherever they are at' and invite them on a journey. Trust and respect comes from recognising individual diversity while supporting the class to evolve into a community of practice (Mayson, 2006). As the facilitator I take on the role of a participative learner, engaging with the students on their journey but encouraging them to 'discover' knowledge.

## Adult learners

Learning can be defined as a more or less permanent change in behaviour or attitude prompted by experience. Such experience may promote change by challenging established behaviours and attitudes and therefore have an emotional component (Delahaye, 2011). To affect such a change, the learner must consent to change and the facilitator must therefore start by understanding the current situation – in particular ‘where lies the student’s motivation’.

According to Roger’s (cited in Knowles, Holton, Swanson, 2005:49) first basic hypothesis of student centred education: “*We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his [sic] learning*”. In the *constructivist approach to learning* (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Killen, 2013), it is the learner who ‘constructs knowledge’. As an instructor, my focus is therefore the student experience: I am a guide and facilitator rather than ‘lecturer transmitting information’ from the lectern in one-way communications to passive learners (Smith, 1998).

Knowles et al (2005) argue that adult learners differ from very young learners with little life experience. Young learners are more accepting of new knowledge whereas adult learners first test new knowledge against their current knowledge. New knowledge must ‘fit’ before it can be accommodated and accepted, it is an incremental change rather than a radical change. Discussed below are the six assumptions of andragogy (Knowles, Holton, Swanson, 2005) with each number relating to an assumption. According to Knowles et al (2005), adult learners:

- *Need to know* why they need to learn [1]
- Have a *self-concept* as capable decision makers [2]
- Bring varying degrees of life *experience* and previous knowledge to the learning [3]
- Become *ready to learn* only as they perceive a need to know [4]
- Have a pragmatic *orientation to learning* [5]
- Can be motivated to learn by both *extrinsic and intrinsic* rewards [6]

This means that as the facilitator of learning, I must provide a context in which the learners perceive themselves as ‘fitting in’, meaning that their self-concept is validated [2], their previous experience and knowledge recognised and welcomed [3], and the outcome of the learning declared [1]. Their decision to enrol in this course is thereby confirmed and reinforced as ‘good’. These first three items are related to the learning environment and can be seen as hygiene factors (Herzberg, 1968); unable to motivate and provide satisfaction with the learning but likely to reduce or eliminate dissatisfaction.

To increase satisfaction with the learning experience and to reinforce the motivation to learn, the content or satisfier factors must be considered (Herzberg, 1968). Each learning module has a clear purpose and relate to an identified problem or task [5]. Rather than be imposed on students, problem identification is encouraged to come from

students as a result of being presented with new tasks, thus providing relevance and a readiness to learn [4]. These factors can contribute to students' sense of achievement and growth and therefore enhance their motivation to learn. It is important that each new task has a clear and explicit link to the overall outcome [1] and that student's self-concept [2] and previous experience [3] is supported. A study by Entwistle & Entwistle (in Biggs & Tang, 2007) found that students described the experience of *understanding* as 'satisfying' and providing a feeling of 'completeness', both examples of intrinsic rewards which stay with the student and can act as motivators for continued learning. *Understanding* can be achieved by 'scaffolding' of skills and carefully time the introduction of new material and tasks.

Another factor particularly important to students who may have previous unfortunate experience in education is a sense of safety, a basic need (Maslow, 1970; cited in Feist, Feist & Roberts, 2013), which if not satisfied may challenge students' self concept [2] and prompt a defensive response that will block the openness to learning [4].

Management theory thus intersects with class room activities and course content. Lectures are strongly based on the text book (Schermerhorn et al., 2011) and covers topics such as planning; motivation – including both Herzberg's and Maslow's theories discussed above; decision-making, leadership, managing teams, communication, change management and organisational learning.

To relate management theory to an educational context, McGregor (2006) warned managers to not *assume* that people lack ambition, dislike work, are irresponsible and resist change as this could become a self-fulfilling prophecy – he called it 'Theory X'. According to McGregor (2006) managers, and by extension therefore learning facilitators, should instead adopt the self-fulfilling prophecy that people are ambitious, willing to work, responsible, self-directed and creative – 'Theory Y'. McGregor's (2006) Theory X and Y is part of the course content (Schermerhorn et al., 2011) and I explicitly position my students as 'Theory Y' students during the process of explaining the theory in class.

Knowles et al (2005:3) also note "*Andragogy works best in practice when it is adapted to fit the uniqueness of the learners and the learning situation*". Goal setting is therefore important as it provides students with a basis for managing their own behaviour (Latham & Locke, 1991). Involving students in setting goals can influence both performance and level of satisfaction. Allowing space in the class room for learners to *discover* the gap between current knowledge and where they want to be in terms of performance becomes a powerful motivator. My approach is informed by two theories: Vroom's (1995) *expectancy theory* and Lewin's (1999) model of *planned change*. Both are also included as part of the course content (Schermerhorn et al., 2011).

According to Vroom (1995), there are three expectancy factors in motivation; Expectancy, Instrumentality and Valence. *Expectancy* is the person's belief that there is a correlation between effort and performance; it is the justified belief that the input of effort will result in desired performance. This is similar to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; cited in Schermerhorn et al., 2011) and particularly important for students who may have low expectations as a result of previous failure in education, and who may therefore 'set themselves up to fail' as this is their expectation. An important function of the first assessment, a research task in preparation for the essay, is to establish

achievement as a realistic prospect. I seek to ‘unfreeze’ students’ negative self-concept in order to facilitate change and therefore learning (Lewin, 1999; cited in Schermerhorn et al., 2011). The task is designed to be relatively simple with clear instructions in the course outline and is also comprehensively explained in class. *Instrumentality* refers to student’s self-belief that achievement of performance will result in a desirable outcome. The task is therefore designed so that the average student, following instructions, can achieve a Credit or Distinction. *Valence* is the student’s belief that such outcome is worth the effort. The vast majority of students achieve at least a Pass on this task and many surprise themselves by getting higher marks. The importance of research skills and link to academic success at undergraduate level is made clear in class, adding real value to the achievement.

## **My strategy**

The aim of my teaching practice is to empower students to see themselves as capable, self-directed managers of their own life-long learning. The strategy has three intertwined components that I have to facilitate:

1. A positive learning environment
2. Connection between experience and theory
3. Foundations of academic skills

### **1. Positive learning environment**

The first and very important step for creating a positive learning environment involves ‘setting the scene’ by clarifying what the course is about, how it will proceed and what the ‘rules of the game’ are. Considerable time is spent on this in the very first session and frequently revisited during the semester.

It is important to clearly identify and explain the purpose of the course (and indeed the program) in detail. My explanation needs to be explicit and reasonably detailed to ‘paint the picture’ of where the journey will start and where it may take them. This must include the purpose of each assessment item and how it relates to expectations at the undergraduate level. To provide this context the course outline must provide a clear framework of how the course will progress through the semester, including details of all assessment items; instructions, due dates, learning objectives, submission and marking criteria. The marking criteria are presented as a question based rubric available to students in the course outline.

At this early stage, students typically experience a relatively high level of uncertainty and doubt about their abilities and what university can offer them. It is therefore very important to emphasise how each assessment item will be further explained in detail in a ‘leap-frog’ fashion as the semester progresses. This means that I spend considerable time in class explaining what to do, what not to do, providing examples and setting aside question time. This process is repeated for each assessment item and starts just before the previous assessment is due. This contributes to a sense of predictability and security and ensures that students stay engaged. Experience shows that, provided the process is clearly explained, the approach works to support motivation to attend class.

It is also important to ‘set the tone’ early on by establishing a climate of openness and trust to facilitate class discussions. Right from the start, students are explicitly encouraged to express their thoughts in class, with one clear caveat; *any* idea is open for scrutiny and discussion, but such discussion *must* be respectful. As the semester progress, I gradually become more insistent on a reasoned approach. To allay students’ fear of being singled out for attention, I look for ‘volunteers’ to engage with. The basis for students fear has several sources, such as:

- Feelings of inadequacy in terms of academic ability
- Feelings of insecurity regarding relationship to other students and me
- Fear of failure or being ridiculed

A generic ‘ice breaker’ exercise, such as ‘two truths and one lie’ approach provides a means to assist students to get to know each other. However, the most important function is that it introduces a little bit of humour and students relax as they start to see other students, and me, as less of a threat. Humour is a recurring theme, used as a stress release throughout the semester. I often introduce it by providing exaggerated examples of how *not* to do something.

By far the most feared assessment is the oral presentation scheduled as part of a group assessment in the second half of the semester. I start preparation for this task early, by ‘stealth’ already in the second week whilst the explicit focus is on the first assessment task, the research exercise. In the first four to five weeks, every lecture includes a session where I form random groups and assign a task, usually to discuss or evaluate a theory presented in the lecture. Students are then asked to stand up and report the outcomes to the class. This has three purposes:

- Facilitate class discussion by assisting students to get to know each other
- Facilitate and prepare for group formation
- Facilitate engagement with the theoretical material

The culmination of the preparation for the oral presentation happens after groups have been formed. The session starts by asking students to organize into their groups. A list of topics, with page numbers in the text book is then put up on the whiteboard and groups get to chose one. Only then are they told that they need to prepare a two minute (30 seconds per person) presentation to the class on the topic and given 10 minutes to prepare. This typically prompts chaos but also generates a lot of attention! I tell them to relax and tell a few anecdotes about weird and wonderful faux pas from previous courses; by me exaggerating and acting out what *not* to do, they see the problem with it, laugh and gain a sense of being able to do better.

An interesting observation is how this exercise contributes to group cohesion as more confident students take charge and encourage the more fearful students. Students often lack the confidence to leave their current comfort zone and I ‘lend’ them confidence. This is possible only if a climate of trust has previously been created.

Then follows an explanation of the purpose of the exercise; to prepare for the assessment and tell them to focus on *how* they present rather than the content of the presentation, explicitly giving them permission to '*not* know what they are talking about' but asking them to introduce themselves and their topic, do proper handover between speakers and to speak contemporaneously – without palm cards or notes. I also encourage them to work together and assist team members who may 'freeze'.

Students are also told to be mindful in their role as audience members; to support the presenters by giving their attention and encouraging smiles. This sometimes needs to be re-iterated as there is a tendency for students to continue their own preparation during others' presentations. Each presentation is followed by applause from the audience and an invitation to reflect on the experience. The presenters tend to reflect that they could do better if they had time to prepare and the audience often reflect on how much more confident students look when they are not reading from notes. The outcome works as a motivator for groups to practice and prepare the assessment. Frequently, I am impressed with the quality of the final presentations.

I am conscious that some students may experience a real panic and take care to identify students who may have more than a 'normal' fear of speaking in front of an audience. Such students are supported individually. Students will be encouraged but not forced to try. Although sometimes very nervous, as yet, no student has opted out and all have expressed a sense of achievement after the experience.

## 2. Connection between experience and theory

Consistent with andragogy (Knowles, Holton III, Swanson 2005:65), adult learners such as my students come with life *experience*. Such experience can be a source of mental habits, biases and presumptions that can on occasion obstruct learning. However, the knowledge that students bring is also a rich and very valuable source of insights and examples. I encourage students to share their knowledge and personal experience in class discussions. Recounted with the full emotional context, such experiences can spark very interesting and constructive discussions, and also validate and acknowledge students' *self-concept* as responsible adults, able to take on university study as independent learners. In an environment perceived as safe, such discussions allow students to explore new insights and discover knowledge by participation and exchange of ideas. I take a backseat and let the class discuss, only intervening to ensure a respectful approach is maintained and to occasionally ask a question to introduce an alternative view or bring up theories that may help further understanding and critical thinking. This is a key teaching approach as it supports students in developing a self-concept as competent participants rather than passive dependents.

Although the theoretical content of the course is foreign to most students, much of it still resonates if explained in terms of previous or current experiences in the workplace or current situation as students. I use this to help students engage with the learning material in a practical way. A series of exercises are used. Each with questions for students to work through, referenced with page numbers to the page in the text book (Schermerhorn et al, 2011) where the theory can be found, for example:

- The session on motivation is followed by an exercise for students to use the motivational theories presented in class to analyse what motivates them and how their team members can help them stay motivated in the group work.
- The session on decision-making is followed by an exercise asking students to evaluate their own decision-making; their decision to enrol in this course is used as an example
- The session on teams and groups is followed by a diagnostic exercise; students are asked to evaluate their team on task performance and member satisfaction; and group processes such as communication, decision making, cohesion and conflict management
- The session on managing change is followed by an exercise asking students to do a force field analysis on their own situation as students

Students frequently report that these exercises help them understand the material and ‘make them think’. Students also comment that they see these exercises as valuable tools to help them succeed.

### 3. Foundations of academic skills

Students, particularly younger students, typically start their academic career with an inventory approach to knowledge: focusing on listing descriptions rather than analysis. The process of gradually moving from a superficial style of learning to a problem solving approach (Biggs & Tang 2007:79; Knowles, Holton III, Swanson 2005:80; Smith 1998:51) is strongly encouraged and supported in this course.

A fundamental purpose of the enabling program and this course is to develop the foundations of academic skills such as research, critical thinking, academic communication (oral and written) and ability to reflect on own progress. The essay assignment involves several of those skills. For many students this is the first time they come into contact with the concept of an academic essay. Previous experience with essay writing varies from ‘none’ to ‘some’. For students who report having written essays, such essays have typically been reflective and personal rather than formal academic essays. Considerable time is spent in class over several sessions, explaining what an academic essay is, what its purpose is and how to write one. The process has three steps:

1. The concept is explained on the whiteboard in an interactive session drawing on student’s prior knowledge. By using the white board rather than a power point at this stage, students are encouraged to take notes and stay engaged in the discussion.
2. The process of writing an academic essay is then explained in ten steps using a power point presentation that is also available for students to refer to later. At this stage I place particular emphasis on research, the first assessment task.
3. Constructive feedback on selection of sources, referencing and presentation (including written expression) is provided on the first assessment to assist students develop the essay.



It is important that my feedback ‘makes sense’ to students and I make myself available before and after assessments to assist, clarify and address any issues. Students writing a second essay spontaneously reflect on how their academic skills have developed, as do former students who have moved on to undergraduate studies and have opportunity to compare their ability to that of other first year students.

Once the essay is marked and feedback provided, the focus turns to the group work; the oral presentation and the written report. The similarities and differences between an academic essay and a written report are explained and the link between the oral presentation and the written report clarified.

## Evaluation and outcomes

The 2012 result of the formal Student Feedback on Course (SFC) undertaken by the University was very encouraging, with *all* values being 4.56 or higher, including two at the maximum of 5.00! In addition, an informal survey – a one-page questionnaire requiring students to anonymously circle answers on Likert scales – was performed in all three course offerings during the last lecture. The result of the informal feedback is consistent with the SFC and verbal feedback sought in class. Over 91% of students reported that BOM helped them develop academic skills such as research, essay writing, oral presentation and managing group work, findings consistent with the SFC. This is also supported by informal recommendations from prior students who reflect from subsequent experience at undergraduate level.

There is a correlation between attendance in class and performance; students who attend class regularly are likely to achieve at least a pass grade and students with low attendance more likely to fail. This may however be the result of common external factors; the same problem that leads to low attendance may also affect the overall effort.

In many ways the assessment items in this course, including the final exam worth 50%, should be seen as formative. For many students, formal exams invigilated by non-teaching staff, is a new experience. The exam is therefore designed to have a graduated level of difficulty with three sections. This assists students to ‘settle in’ in the exam situation as they answer easy short definitions before moving to short answer questions and finally essay questions.

In conclusion, there is considerable scope for further development. This is an ongoing process as various exercises and resources are developed, tested and student feedback sought on the usefulness of each. There is also considerable self-reflection by teaching staff to consider how to improve further, including keeping in touch with previous students and seeking informal comments on long-term value of the course. This would be an interesting area for a formal research study.

## References

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Co.
- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (3rd ed.). Maidenhead, England: Open University Press.
- Delahaye, B. (2011). *Human resource development: adult learning and knowledge management* (3rd ed.). Prahan VIC: Tilde University Press.

- Feist, J., Feist, G. J., & Roberts, T. (2013). *Theories of personality* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- McGregor, D. (2006). *The human side of enterprise* (Annotated ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Herzberg, F. (1968). One more time: how do you motivate employees? *Harvard Business Review*, 46(1), 53-62.
- Killen, R. (2013). *Effective teaching strategies: lessons from research and practice*. South Melbourne VIC: Cengage.
- Lewin, K. (1999). Group decision and social change. In K. Lewin & M. Gold (Eds.), *The complete social scientist: A Kurt Lewin reader* (pp. 265-284). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.
- Mayson, S. E. (2006). The contribution of current ideas in adult learning to human resource development. In P. Holland & H. De Cieri (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in Human Resource Development: an Australian perspective*. Frenchs Forest: Pearson.
- Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The Adult Learner* (6th ed.). Burlington, MA: Elsevier.
- Latham, G. P., & Locke, E. A. (1991). Self-regulations through goal setting. *Organizational behaviour and human decision processes*, 50, 212-247.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and Personality* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Schermerhorn, J., Davidson, P., Poole, D., Simon, A., Woods, P., & Chau, S. L. (2011). *Management* (4th Asia Pacific Edition ed.). Milton, Australia: Wiley Education.
- Smith, A. (1998). *Training and development in Australia* (2 ed.). Sydney: Butterworths.
- Vroom, V. H. (1995). *Work and motivation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.