

2006-950: WHAT TOMORROW BRINGS

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What Tomorrow Brings

Abstract

Motivated by the death of a classmate during the first week of school, grief gave way to service learning. The management of teams class syllabus had planned a semester's study of team theory, observation of team influence and roles and analysis of team performance in films. The class made a decision to radically restructure the learning experience to respond to their needs to actively work for a positive outcome from a tragic event.

This article talks about how the changed class format helped students to integrate skills from a broad college experience—marketing, accounting, writing, management, leadership, graphics, public relations, facilities planning, project management and research. The learning cycle changed from observation and reflection, abstract concepts, testing in new situations and experiencing (Kolb & Fry)¹ to one of creating, planning, deciding and acting (Cain, Cummings & Stanchfield)². The professor's typical approach to teaching was reversed. Students performed a necessary step in the project, and then the professor applied theory and assigned readings to reinforce the experience.

The unexpected outcomes of the experience included very strong support from the Dean's Office, opportunities to recruit high school students, and community awareness of the college's programs. Students expanded networking skills and acquired a better understanding of charitable giving. Their engagement with the community led to some new college-business and industry connections. Students demonstrated tremendous creativity in planning an event that benefited a scholarship fund in honor of their classmate.

Developing a service learning project

The experience did force this professor to change her methodology. She looks forward to the next class session because the responsibility for learning and teaching is shared. The students are eager to share their newest discoveries and ideas. It is a real pleasure to be a partner in their intellectual growth and skills development.

While the scholarship project was very special to those who participated in the described event, by no means does this imply that a service learning project has to originate from an emotional experience. Many larger communities have volunteer clearing houses that match organizational needs with volunteer interests. A survey of student skills and interests helped to identify several community project possibilities.

Students visited several of the listed agencies to investigate their needs and assess the organization's support of service learning. Choices were narrowed to three agencies. The final decision was made based on the wildlife organization's quick response to interviews and

inquiries, specific knowledge of their immediate needs, and a successful history of using community groups in the past.

This semester's class is working with a wildlife rehabilitation organization to build an intensive care unit for large waterfowl. Local chapters of Ducks Unlimited, the Wild Turkey Federation, the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society have helped to promote the class project. A film production by a well-known local wildlife photographer, raptors and owls will be featured at a fund-raising event at the end of the semester.

Service learning is a two-way street. While the students are learning civic and environmental responsibility, organizations in the community are also learning about programs of the college. Service learning "extends campus resources into the community and reinforces the value of the scholarship of engagement."³

As classroom community develops, students become bolder in their resourcefulness and creativity. Communication skills that are in such high demand by employers are strengthened as students examine messages from multiple facets. Learning is augmented and vitalized through application to students' lives

Service learning uses business skills such as budgeting, cost estimating, teamwork, project planning, community networking, marketing, research, and event coordination. The engineering technology assignments range from developing a database for the non-profit group, designing logos and promotional materials, or designing cages that can't be opened by raccoons. Student teams have the opportunity to work on the piece of the project that best fits their skills and interests.

First class

Chaos reigns over the first class meeting, no matter how detailed and diligent the instructor's planning. Students occupy classroom seats but not roster spots. Other students seem to have vaporized between a sighting of them at the library and the appointed classroom time. The bookstore stocks the ninth edition of the class text, because the eighth edition the instructor had planned to use is not available in the needed quantity. The heating and cooling system does not mesh with outside temperatures and students' attire.

Fearing the looming entropic system the instructor hands out the syllabus and promises to make revisions online. Projects and attendance expectations are outlined. A team poker activity introduces students to the concept of synergy. "Who am I", an exercise intended to reveal relevant background factors, follows. By the time the exercise reaches the seats of two twenty-one-year olds in the back row, disorder again rules. They convulse with laughter as they listen to each other's introductions. As the turn is passed to others, they try to avoid one another's eyes, but now they are actually giggling. The driver's seat is stolen by the personable sorcerer named Luke. Class is over.

The instructor plans to thwart future loss of control. A pop quiz will sober the class. A handout and discussion on ground rules for team participation is planned. Students will be split into

teams assigned by the instructor. The teams will write their own contracts for group expectations. The instructor finds tips for dealing with disruptive people and prepares to follow some of the suggestions.

While students are a part of a large research university, programs from the college are located throughout the state. The organizational leadership program is relatively small with about 85 majors. It is difficult to obtain a degree without taking a course from one of the three professors. Faculty and students know one another well. Maybe another faculty member will have a tip to keep the student engaged with the instructor's planned agenda.

Teachable moment

It's a holiday weekend, but also the first weekend of the school term. The instructor doesn't want to check web mail for the class. Dutifully, the instructor checks, knowing that students always have questions they were afraid to ask in front of others. The second e-mail dazes the instructor. The sociable sophomore was killed in an automobile accident Friday night.

The next class meeting is difficult. All seventeen members are stunned. The sad group attempted to process, debrief, review and reflect on the news. Students had bits and pieces of second-hand information about the accident. All left with many "what ifs"?

The original syllabus seemed artificial. The class made a decision to radically restructure the learning experience to respond to their needs to actively work for a positive outcome from a tragic event. The death of a classmate forced all to move beyond the Kolb learning cycle of talking, reading, acting and experimenting (Kolb & Fry 1975).

The emergent learning cycle was creating, planning, deciding and acting (Cain 2005). Learning from the past no longer seemed to fit anyone's needs. The professor served as mentor, coach, and cheerleader. Informal learning was supplemented with formal learning.

The professor's typical approach to teaching was reversed. Students performed a necessary step in the project, and then the professor applied theory and assigned readings to reinforce the experience. Leadership shifted from a teacher-focused process to *ad hoc* leadership as students stepped into leadership roles.

Service learning seemed like the best way to proceed to develop team skills and an understanding of team theory, roles and leadership. Students reflected on their meetings, activities and feelings in a weekly log. All needed to become still, let out feelings and permit ideas to emerge. Class members needed to touch their own spirituality for guidance. Time was allowed to step back, reflect and transform perceptions, selves and actions (Senge, Jaworski, Scharmer and Flowers 2005).⁴

The class was faced with a very real problem-solving activity. An adventure-based learning experience was rising from the ashes of the old syllabus. The class brainstormed to find ways to cover team concepts and materials while making the experience more meaningful in light of their classmate's death.

Students were assigned investigative tasks. They researched possible ways to earn money for a memorial scholarship fund established by Luke's parents. Input came from local Board of Health officials, concessionaires, community organizations, golf courses, a charitable foundation, community calendars, and school officials. Team members accepted small failures and loss of time as part of the learning process, although some were anxious to get started on the project.

The thorough investigation of fund-raising possibilities allowed class members to reach a consensus. Based on information yielded in the search, a spaghetti dinner and auction seemed like the best choice. The menu would be simple, the ingredients were inexpensive and the cuisine had appeal to persons of all ages. Merchants, industries and individuals were already volunteering donations of items for both a possible dinner and auction.

Planning

Team members had to learn about marketing and accounting. An anticipated budget was developed with possible sources of revenue. The ticket price had to be reasonable enough that a family could afford to attend the event, but it also must cover food costs if the group was forced to buy ingredients.

A team of students investigated possible locations for the spaghetti dinner. Luke's former high school cafeteria was available late in the semester. A target date for the event needed to be chosen in conjunction with the host school's events calendar. A Saturday double-header basketball game seemed like a perfect choice. The cafeteria would be available and a crowd of 2500 was expected to attend the ball game.

An entire class period was spent developing a common vocabulary for tasks and responsibilities. Each team was expected to produce a Gantt chart and to keep it up to date for use in planning their part of the project. One team took leadership for an overall chart. Tasks dependent upon other tasks were identified. The project was broken into tasks and subtasks.

Estimates of the task durations were entered in the charts. Milestones were established along with assignment of persons responsible for each element. With the accomplishment of each task, the teams had to decide if the results met their goal. Decisions had to be made on the adjustment of the Gantt chart. Were their initial estimates feasible?

Each group or sub-group then had to act on new information or proceed to the next goal. The process was like a self-test for team members. Were enough team members assigned to this phase of the project? Were they at a major review point in their plan?

One team developed physical facilities plans for the dinner. They drew plans for table arrangements and estimated seating capacity of their designs. They talked with the school janitors and cafeteria cook to make sure that their estimates were feasible.

One team planned for worst case scenarios. They examined all the pieces that could fall through or go wrong. Had they neglected anything in the critical path? Were redundant systems possible

for some elements of the plan? By this phase in the planning, some team members were starting to have uneasiness. Could they really make this event happen?

Assessing learning

In service learning students are responsible for assessing their own learning. Each student keeps an individual log of the class meetings. The student's team then does a joint assessment of their team progress. The use of Gantt charts, milestones and Six Sigma methods helps to keep the class focused. Several students were responsible for recording each night's "collective memory". These were shared to check for understanding and accuracy.

The instructor tests for textbook concept mastery twice during the semester. Grades are based on individual scores, individual contributions, team members' evaluations, teacher observations, quality of learning logs, and participation in the class and project. The team's ability to overcome hardships or conflict is also considered.

Learning about open systems

Open systems act with the environment. Several significant outsiders became insiders at times in the project. Working on the project every class meeting kept the dead classmate's memory in the forefront of everyone's thoughts. The Dean of Students' Office sent a grief counselor to help the class and instructor verbalize their grief. While expressing grief was a painful process for the class, it allowed healing to begin to take place. The counseling session also helped all to acknowledge that each member was in a different place in the grief process. This knowledge enabled better listening and consideration among group members.

The deceased student's parents agreed to come to a class session. They shared memories of their son and told of his favorite activities. They became valuable consultants for the project. Luke's mother revealed that she was a member of the county school board. One student formed a close relationship with the parents, which served as a conduit of information.

What geographical area would be most receptive to publicity for the event? The traffic accident occurred in the same county as the student's college. He lived in another county and the scholarship would benefit a student in his home county. The mother campus was in a third county. All were within a twenty-five mile drive of the location for the event. Students had to develop a strategy to target specific audiences for the publicity.

One team took responsibility for developing communications tools. They printed tickets and planned ticket sales events at high school football and basketball games. They developed a flyer to post in various locations in their workplaces and the two major communities. They printed color brochures with a list of auction items and more detailed information on the event.

Team members' connections to other groups began to add tremendous benefits to the project. A quiet member of the communications team volunteered his girlfriend to develop initial news releases. A public relation major at another university, she and her professor wrote press releases for radio and newspapers. Another student, wife of a newsroom reporter, arranged for a

feature article interview in the local paper. One student spoke about the event on a radio program.

The public relations major's roommate was the daughter of another member of the county school board. This school board member volunteered to help with acquiring the dry spaghetti and sauce ingredients. Her little red wagon was prominently displayed in Luke's high school to gather the spaghetti donations.

The deceased student's giggling partner from the first night of class committed eighty pounds of home-raised hamburger to the project. The school superintendent who leases the college classroom space was persuaded to donate a cook, who is the aunt of a student, to prepare the spaghetti sauce. Luke's former high school agreed to donate their cafeteria for the dinner.

A senior student who lived close to the campus operated a family auction business. He visited the class to offer advice about the best way to sell the donated auction items. The class invited him to auction some of the items live. The auctioneer helped students to develop a lot number system and the arrangement of items on the auction list.

A class member volunteered his band to provide background music for the event. Seven members and their equipment appeared. Their carefully chosen selections added dignity and an uplifting mood for the dinner. None of the class had ever heard them perform. They were talented and gracious.

The mother of another student donated \$1500 of tapestries from her North Carolina factory to the auction effort. A student team selected a variety items that would have local appeal, price appeal, gender appeal and seasonal appeal. Return from the outputs of the group reactivated the system. This large donation prompted the auction team to generate a list of items needed to balance the auction offering.

Energy from the group activities was reinvested in the system, resulting in increased confidence and positive attitudes. The event began to be seen as a process of ongoing events and interrelationships. The project was experiencing influence from both members and outsiders.

Empowerment

Kirkman and Rosen's research (1999)⁵ reveals that empowerment leads to better team outcomes. They identified four dimensions of empowerment: potency, meaningfulness, autonomy, and impact. The initial successes reinforced the sense that team members had the power to accomplish their goals.

There was no hesitancy in seeing the team tasks as meaningful. All of the students worked at least part time. Some of them paid their own fees. A scholarship had meaning to all, especially since it would honor their deceased classmate.

Team members experienced discretion and freedom in action. A division of labor was attempted, although there was always network overlap. The networks and locations of team

members soon forced reliance on e-mail and cell phones. While some members were territorial about their assignments, in the end, members learned that there was too much to accomplish. Limiting the power of others to act upon an opportunity would limit the resources of the project. Members learned that it was best to share information at regular large group meetings, where the knowledge would have most impact.

As contributions were charted and the date of the event neared, team members felt the work they were producing was significant. The money they raised would remain in the community foundation beyond their own lifetimes. Their friend's family would have the comfort of knowing that his classmates cared enough to help another student with college fees. The significance of their work helped them to overcome their disquietude.

Students were challenged to examine their own beliefs and values. Each had to make "sense" of the turn the semester had taken. They needed to be insightful about the beliefs that drove their own leadership decisions. Class members were forced to articulate their own personal values as they worked in teams. These discussions and professions would never have taken place under other circumstances.

Collective learning

Would the whole be larger than the parts? Segmentation and inclusion contended for students' energies. When groups left to work on their own tasks those left behind felt left out. When all were together team members fretted that they should be working on a specific piece of the project instead of taking class time to make decisions. There was a real fear that working apart would hamper communications. There was also fear that the class would not have enough time to complete all of the project's pieces.

Some students were frustrated by a perceived lack of structure. They wanted to have a firm structure for tasks, responsibilities and a time table for volunteers the day of the event. Others were more interested in the processes of how materials would arrive at the event.

The development of self-leadership waned at times and there was anxiety. Some teams confided that they saw their group as superior. The instructor coached when she was tempted to control. Team members began to see that they choose the behaviors that make them successful. The yeast of self-leadership (Manz 1991)⁶ began to let the individual ingredients rise into a rich loaf.

Team members developed stronger bonds with one another than most teams do. The shared experience of grief and their openness with it let team members provide energy when one member was overwhelmed. They could listen to one another and share their negative emotions. Team members programmed their cell phones with each other's numbers. Frequently the conversations began with questions about a phase of an assignment or task and quickly moved to the real concern—the deep sadness some members felt and the need to make sense of the death of their classmate.

All became a part of the larger group effort by the last month of the project. Not one class member failed to make a major contribution to the team effort. They worked to really listen to

one another and to understand. Team members were able to visualize success (Bridges 2001).⁷ They became the embodiment of the Michael Jordan quote, “Talent wins games, but teamwork wins championships.”

Class members were extremely proud of their accomplishments. They were energized by their successes. The project helped them regain a sense of control. “Groups learn when they monitor the effectiveness of the process of group interaction, while at the same time focusing on getting the task done (Drejer 2000)”.⁸

One student stopped by my office recently. He said, “I never want to have a class like that again.” I asked if he disliked the team leadership subject matter. “No, that’s not what I mean. I never want another classmate to die.” Things will never be the same for any of us. A profound change occurred during that semester. We came to understand the proverb “Even in laughter the heart may be in pain.”

New relationships

The project developed new relationships among diverse organizations. The college students worked with high school students who were members of the Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) chapter. The treasurer of SADD made a short presentation at the event. The high school student council needed to participate in community service projects, and some of their members volunteered to work at the dinner.

The Dean’s Office of the College gave support to the project. A representative attended the dinner to represent the University at large. The university’s risk management office worked with the local school principal to provide liability coverage for the event. Trust emerged from the foundation board as they saw the tremendous commitment made on behalf of one of their funds. Foundation board members purchased a dozen dinner tickets.

Networking continued to spread. Luke had been employed at a local hospital. One of the gift shop volunteers was the grandmother of a student services secretary. Their family helped with the event. The hospital displayed auction items in their gift shop. The class discovered a family connection between the campus computer technician and Luke. Their large family attended. The secretary at a large local church was another cousin. The church advertised the event and displayed auction items.

More than seventy different entities donated food or auction items as shown in Figure 1 below. Some businesses donated a portion and let the students buy an additional amount of product at their cost. Tea and orange drink to serve 400 persons were donated by fast-food restaurants. Students developed strong negotiating abilities in their searches for resources.

The students’ project raised \$4685.00 for Luke’s scholarship fund. The partnership of college, foundation and high school solidified a permanent contribution to education in Luke’s county. The class’ learning was social, interactive and capable of new capacities (Schön).⁹ They became a learning organization during the memorable semester.

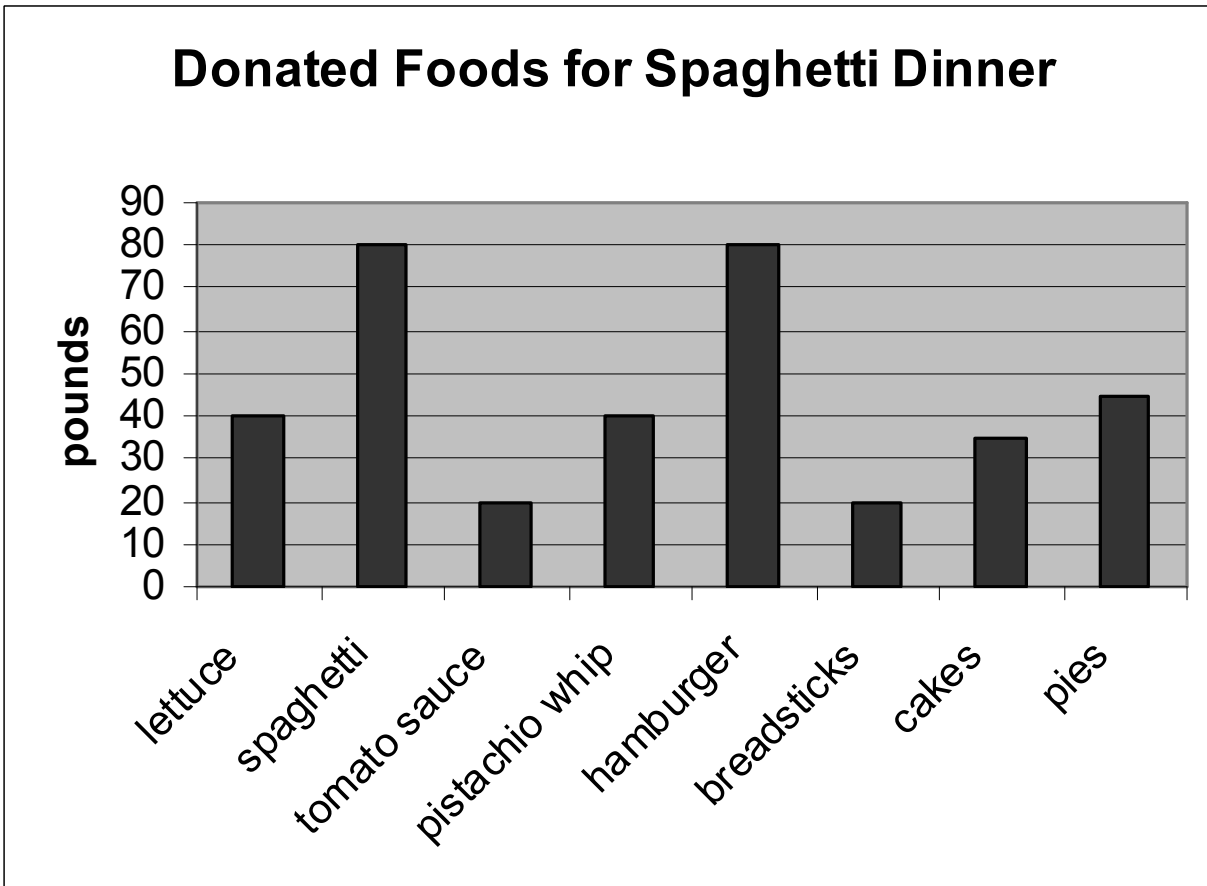


Figure 1.

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