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TEAM TEACHING GENERAL MANAGEMENT: THEORETICALLY, EXPERIENTIALLY, PRACTICALLY*

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How should one hundred second-year MBA students be exposed to the processes of general management, specifically to the subject matter typically covered in courses called Management Policy and Organization Theory? A number of years ago, we decided at McGill to design a full year course (26 weeks) to facilitate both conceptual and experimental learning. Consequently, we put together a rather elaborate course package, consisting of three basic sections:

(a) theory sessions, where the central thrust is conceptual,

(b) skill development sessions, where the central thrust is experiential, and

(c) a field project, where the two are placed into a real-world setting.

Figure 1: An Integrated General Management Course

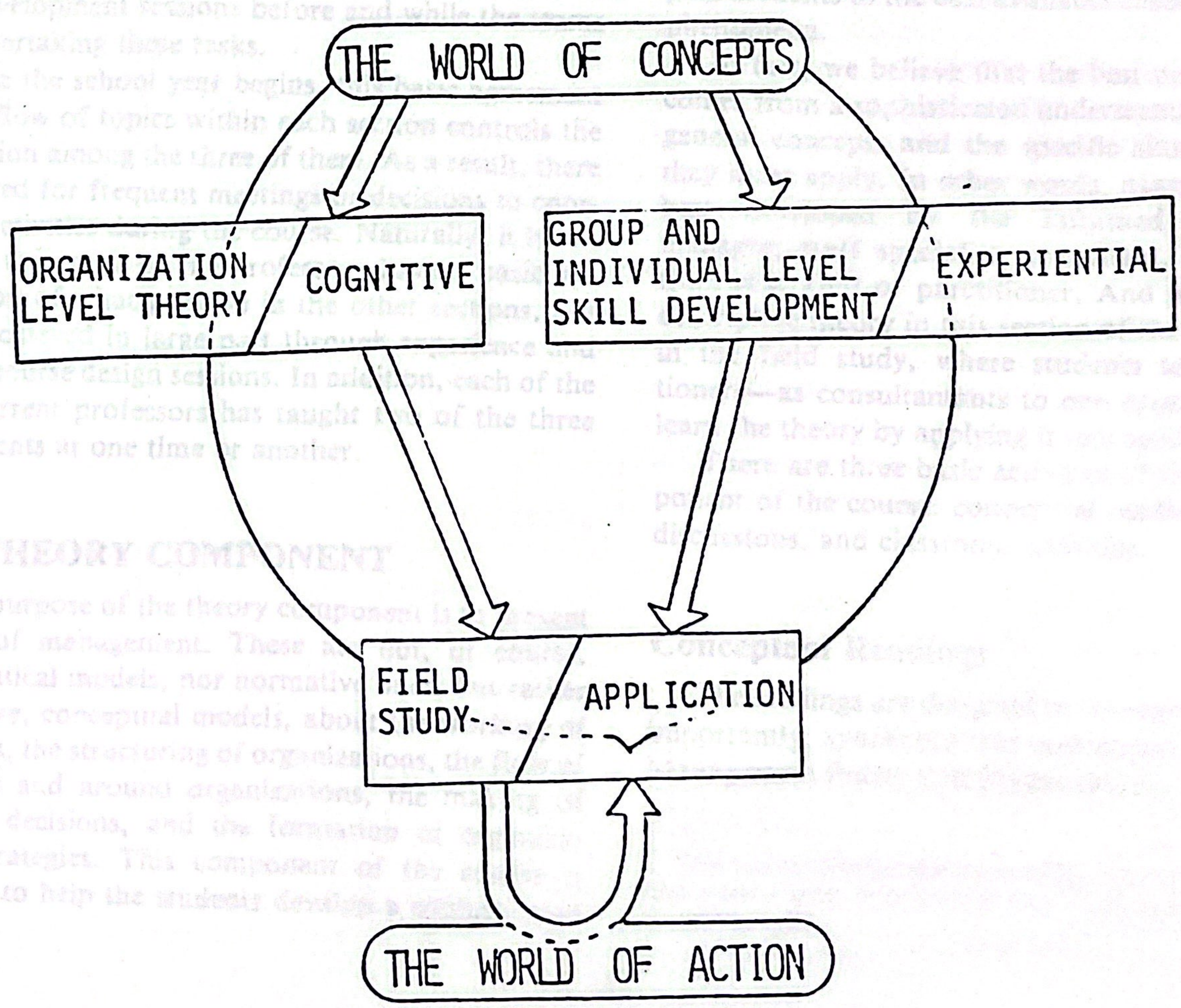

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Figure 1 shows these three sections, together with their interrelationships, sitting between the world of concepts and the world of action. The theory and skill development sections draw from the world of concepts, and prepare the students for the field study, which operates in the world of action. As the feedback loops indicate, students bring their field experiences back to the theory and skill development sessions, and, when, the results of these experiences are analyzed systematically, the feedback loop goes back into the world of concepts. (An example of this loop is the paper by Mintzberg, Raisinghani and Theoret, 1976, that reported on twenty-five studies of decision-making carried out in this course.)

The body of this article describes each of the three components of the course. It should be emphasized at the outset—to draw on the terminology of organizational structuring—that his course has been so set up to achieve its integration by design, not by ongoing adjustment as the course develops. For example, before the course begins, the three professors meet to ensure a smooth flow of the topics to be covered in each of the three sections. Thus, the subject of organizational structuring must be treated in the theory sessions in time to serve as a basis for the initial descriptive reports in the field study; teams must be formed quickly in the skill development sessions so that they can begin the search for their field organizations; input on how to organize initial meetings and negotiate entry with potential field organizations must be made in the skill development sessions before and while the teams are undertaking these tasks.

Once the school year begins, this basic agreement on the flow of topics within each section controls the integration among the three of them. As a result, there is no need for frequent meetings or decisions to coordinate activities during the course. Naturally, it is important that each of the professors have a basic appreciation of what goes on in the other sections, but this is achieved in large part through experience and the pre-course design sessions. In addition, each of the three current professors has taught two of the three components at one time or another.

THE THEORY COMPONENT

The purpose of the theory component is to present models of management. These are not, of course, mathematical models, nor normative ones, but rather descriptive, conceptual models, about the working of managers, the structuring of organizations, the flow of power in and around organizations, the making of strategic decisions, and the formation of organizational strategies. This component of the course is designed to help the students develop a sophisticated understanding of these processes, based on description grounded in empirical research.

Consider, for example, managerial work. When students are asked in the first class to describe what managers do, the word "planning" inevitably appears very quickly. And just as inevitably, a question about what that word means—"What exactly do managers do when they plan?"—draws a blank. The point is made that the students already have models of how managers work but that these models are often shallow, based more on folklore rather than on systematic evidence.

Why descriptive? That question comes up repeatedly in class. "Don't tell us what is; tell us what should be." The fields of management in general, and of Management Policy in particular—with its principles, planning, and case study traditions—have strong roots in normative theory. The theory component of this course rejects those traditions in the belief that the role of the professional educator is to equip his students with the best of descriptive theory. Just as the engineering student learns physics (without ever saying: "Don't tell us how the atom works; tell us how it should work"), so too the McGill management student learns how managers work, how they make strategic decisions, and so on. The ability of practitioners to deal with phenomena as complex as these is dependent on their comprehension of them. And so we believe our role as researchers and academics is to expose students to the best available descriptions of these phenomena.

In fact, we believe that the best normative theory comes from a sophisticated understanding of both the general concepts and the specific situation to which they must apply. In other words, normative theory is best developed by the informed practitioner—manager, staff specialist, consultant. Our job is to train that kind of parctitioner. And so we focus on descriptive theory in this section of the course. Later, in the field study, where students serve as practitioners—as consultantants to one organization—they learn the theory by applying it to a specific situation.*

There are three basic activities of the theory component of the course: conceptual readings, classroom discussions, and classroom activities.

Conceptual Readings

The readings are designed to summarize and, more importantly, *synthesize* that conceptual knowledge in Management Policy and Organizational Theory that is

*For a more detailed discussion of the roles of descriptive, normative and eclectic theory in the field of Management Policy, see Mintzberg, 1977a.

rooted in empirical research. In other words, we wish to draw on as much research-based literature as possible, but to present it not as a review or smorgasbord, but as an integrated set of concepts. In 1968, the first year of the theory sessions and field project, there was no course-related textbook that achieved such synthesis. (Indeed, at that time there was virtually no textbook of conceptual materials in Management Policy.) As a result, one of the professors set out to collect the research-based literature and to synthesize it into the required textbook. That "textbook" now exists as a series of five books, one of which is published, one in press, two in draft form, and the fifth as yet only in the form of two papers (respectively, Mintzberg 1973a, in press, 1974, 1977b, 1973b, and forthcoming). Related to the feedback arrow up to the world of concepts in Figure 1, all but the first of these have benefited substantially from the field studies. In carrying out these studies, students have rejected, modified, extended, and provided support and illustration for different aspects of the theory, showing repeatedly the need to set the theory in context. That feedback has proven invaluable, and is reflected in the extensive use in the books of anecdotes from these studies.

Classroom Discussions

The entire class of 100 students meets together for two hours each week in the theory sessions, part of which are devoted to exploration and elaboration of the readings. About two-thirds of this theory time is spent with the basic elements of the theory, covered in the following order:

Introduction: — What is general management? What do the students know about it? Some of its main characteristics. Teaching it through descriptive theory.

Managerial Work: — What do managers do? The roles managers perform. The main characteristics of their work. How managerial jobs differ in different situations? The dilemmas that arise in the job of managing an organization.

Organizational Structuring: — How do organizations structure themselves? Division of labor and the mechanisms of coordination. How organizations function—the flow of authority, material, information, and decision processes. The design parameters: job specialization, behavior formalization, training and indoctrination, unit grouping, unit size, planning and control systems, liaison devices, vertical and horizontal decentralization. The contingency factors—age, size, technical system, environment, power.

Power Processes: — How does power get distributed in and around organizations? External control of the organization through pressure campaigns, the board of directors, etc. Internal control through the systems of bureaucratic and personal authority, politics, and ideology.

Strategic Decision Making: — How do organizations make important decisions? Identification, development and selection phases. Dynamic factors. A model of strategic decision making, and different paths through it.

Strategy Formation: — How do organizations interrelate their decisions over time to form strategies? Entrepreneurial, adaptive and planning modes of strategy making. Archtypes and patterns in the evolution of strategies.

The other third of the classroom theory time focuses on synthesizing these elements. Specifically, sessions are devoted to the discussion of each of five "structural configurations," called Simple Structure, Machine Bureaucracy, Professional Bureaucracy, Divisionalized Form, and Adhocracy (Mintzberg, in press). Each is shown in the readings to represent a unique cluster of the design parameters and the contingency factors of structure. Classroom discussion focuses on integrating the other elements, that is, on investigating, in each of the structural configurations, the key managerial roles, how power is distributed, and how strategic decisions and strategies are formulated. Here in effect, we find a meaningful way to integrate the subject matter of Management Policy with that of Organizational Theory. Time also is devoted to discussion of the managerial and social issues associated with each configuration.

Classroom Activities

Another part of the two classroom time in the theory section is devoted to activities associated with the theory. Since the focus is general management, we have invited in chief executives who could engage the students in discussion related to the readings of the class (not to make speeches).

We have found it particularly useful to bring in a guest on the subject of each of the structural configurations, for example the head of the National Film Board of Canada on Adhocracy. Other kinds of guests have proven of great interest on the other topics as well, such as the head of planning for the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games who came to discuss strategic decision making and the general council for the Montreal crime probe who came to discuss the "criminal organization."

Other classroom activities include films (such as the National Film Board series on "The Corporation," which well illustrates certain aspects of policy making), and formal debates among the students. (For example, a three-way debate on "Resolved: That the McGill Faculty of Management use the entrepreneurial/adaptive/planning mode of strategy making" has proved successful. The debaters are carefully selected to present the three positions—a highly entrepreneurial student, another with a good deal of government experience, and a third, highly technocratic one.) Finally, a number of classes are set aside at the end of the course to discuss various issues associated with the theory, for example, corporate social responsibility, managing contemporary government, foreign ownership in Canada, industrial democracy, and some of the newer techniques of planning (in the final analysis, a little bit of normative theory!).

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The basic rationale for the skill development portion of the course is that managerial work is not simply a question of concepts. When one looks at what managers really do, some basic skills such as working with peers and running meetings are crucial determinants of survival and success. It is to the development of these kinds of action skills that this section of the course is directed.

In a sense, this section serves an integrative function for the theory and field study aspects of the course. The theory component, while enabling students to learn *about* managerial work and decision making, leaves them with the question of how *to do* such work. The field study, being a *real* and challenging task, creates a situation where many of the students strongly feel the need for help on management-related skills. The field study serves as an arena in which individuals can take what they have practiced in the Skill Development sessions, and apply them to a real-world situation. Equally important, because they work closely with each other, all the team members can supply support and feedback for each other.

This Skill Development portion of the course is done in two sections of roughly 50 people each, meeting for about two hours once a week. While smaller classes and more frequent meeting times would be desirable, the size and time represent compromises in response to resource availability.

Guiding Assumptions

Our assumption is that Skill Development is more effectively learned with a problem- or need-centered format than with a theory-centered approach. Building the course around the needs of the field-study teams is one response to this assumption. Another is to structure learning situations that tap into live concerns of second-year MBA students. Typical concerns beyond the field project at this time are employment interviews, career planning, and how to get started on a new job.

Another major design assumption is that there is not nearly enough time in the school year for each student to practice any given skill in a classroom setting to the point of mastery. Therefore, it is necessary for individuals to practice and learn on their own, using classmates and others as resources for feedback and guidance. Class sessions are used to create opportunities for initial experimentation and feedback, and to introduce relevant conceptual guidance. Most importantly, class time is devoted to the process of "learning how to learn."

Learning how to learn from experience is the meta-objective of the course. We want students to be able to reflect on their experiences with deepened awareness and be able to plan new approaches to increased personal effectiveness in managerial situations. Our focus is more on the learning process, and less on specific prescriptions.

Another design assumption is that a certain minimum time together is necessary to build a climate of trust and supportiveness within both the teams and the class. This influences the order in which certain topics are approached. For example only after working on group performance, analyzing and critiquing group process during the early part of the year, are individuals capable of dealing with more personal feedback about themselves and how they impact on the other team members.

A final design assumption has to do with making sure that evaluation methods do not discourage risk taking and experimentation. Students are under a lot of pressure from more structured courses, and, as in most MBA programs, are very grade-conscious. The task then is to make sure that everyone appreciates that the nature and quality of his or her experimentation and experience is not evaluated, but that what is being graded is the ability to reflect on and learn from those experiences.

The grade is skill development counts for twenty percent of the total course grade. This is measured by four papers students are asked to write during the year, in which they reflect on specific experiences, connect them with relevant theories, and discuss what they might try differently in the future. These are very much in the nature of the "Personal Application Analyses" described by Kolb et al. (1974). The dilemma is to make unambiguous demands for rigorous reflection, and at the same time downplay the importance of grades. The attempt is made to respond to that dilemma by providing extensive and personal discussion and feedback on each paper, while distributing grades within a relatively narrow range.

Content Areas

After the initial sessions which are devoted to the unfreezing process, the forming of teams, and exploring the idea of experiential learning, the following skill areas are developed during the two semesters.

1. *Working in groups:* — We work on distinguishing content and process, task and maintenance role behavior, and different methods by which groups control themselves. During each semester, each team has a portion of one of their meetings videotaped, and then has an individual two-hour session to analyze the tape. These sessions are highpoints of the semester since for most students it is the first time they receive the feedback inherent in seeing themselves in action.

2. *Consulting:* — Sessions are devoted to working through the general consulting cycle (prework, entry, work, exit), planning and conducting meeting with potential clients, and structuring of projects. In addition, a session is devoted to nondirective counselling, with a broader emphasis on general managerial applications.

3. *Interpersonal communication:* — The main emphasis is on skill in giving and receiving feedback. The work is done in the context of building teams.

4. *Career planning and job interviewing:* — Students analyze prior success experiences and personal strengths and values, and experiment with different approaches to typical interview questions. An outside resource, the head of a local executive recruiting firm, helps them to consider such topics as resume writing, interview dynamics (role plays), research and followup techniques.

5. *Conflict management:* — Through instruments and role playing, individuals get a chance to look at their own orientations to conflict, and experiment with different approaches to two-person conflict situations.

6. *Dealing with power:* — After engaging in a total class power simulation, individuals explore their own interpersonal orientations with emphasis on control and influence using FIRO-B (Schutz, 1958). Groups provide feedback to individuals on these dimensions, and explore more deeply the interactions within the team. Analysis of the second team meeting videotape is scheduled at this point to provide more concrete data for discussion.

7. *Leadership:* — Through role playing of various leadership situations, such as performance appraisal and attempting to affect change, students get a chance to apply some of the skills which they have been working on (active listening, working in groups, conflict management, etc.), and get feedback on their performance. The effort is made to relate performance in role plays to experiences within the project terms.

In general, students response to this section of the course has been good. The initial classes represent a considerable unfreezing of ingrained attitudes about how an MBA class should be run, and about the amount of responsibility individuals must assume for their own learning and for the success of the class. The work on group process is very energizing and engaging and by the middle of the first semester most students have become quite enthusiastic about experiential learning in general and about their own skill development in particular.

THE FIELD STUDY

The Field Study component of the general management course provides a testing ground for concepts presented in the theory component of the class (as well as concepts from other courses) and also serves as a basis for developing new concepts for organizational activities that current literature does not cover. The field study also provides students with an opportunity to practice and develop personal skills in an organizational setting.

By the end of the first semester, each team, composed of six students, is expected to present a research report on the organization, its environment, and its processes, with particular reference to top management activities, and with connections to the theory the students have read. By the end of the second semester, each team is expected to present a professional consulting report directed mainly to the executives of their organization. The objective is to develop material, usually in the form of recommendations on an agreed upon top management problem or area of interest, that the executives will evaluate as being useful to the organization.

The Field Study has the obvious advantages of providing current, first-hand, exploratory contacts with executives, as contrasted with the predigested case reports about activities of unknown managers. However, it is a demanding and time-consuming endeavour for students, participating professors and executives, but one we feel worth the effort when taken seriously.

Role of Professor

In the most recent variation of the Field Study, the professor has assumed the role of "Supervising Consultant" for each of the sixteen teams. He meets with each half of the class once a week. Several introductory and orientation discussions, with examples of previous team successes and failures, help prepare the students for their projects. Some of the topics include: general orientation and theoretical concepts for research and consulting; criteria for selecting a suitable organization; guidelines for "work" phase, including fact-finding and analysis; developing a mutually satisfactory consulting topic with the organization; preparing the proposal; making recommendations and forecasting probable effects of implementation steps; developing a thorough understanding of the organization's top management activities using theoretical concepts and models; communicating findings, orally and in writing; criteria for evaluating research and consulting activities.

Each team appoints a representative for purposes of communicating with the professor. Representatives distribute copies of memos and attend meetings with the professor weekly, through October. Such communication, as well as the posting of a list of organizations currently being contacted, serve to ensure that different teams do not contact the same ones, and that "spare" organizations may be contacted by needy teams. Representatives' meetings also serve as a medium for exchanging with each other and with the professor experiences and techniques in the difficult early stages of entry and acceptance.

The Professor arranges regular team meetings in his office to hear progress reports during November-December, and February-March, acting as "coach" in regard to problems the teams encounter. These activities ensure that the teams adhere to benchmarks necessary to complete their projects within the time available. In addition, teams drop in regularly during the week and are free to call on the professor whenever urgent problems arise.

Teams practice presenting their proposals before the class from mid-January to mid-February, then make their formal presentations, with one or more executives present, between March 20 and April 15. Executives appraise team performance and the usefulness of the project to their organizations. Students also evaluate their peers' performance.

Selection of Organization

One essential prerequisite for successful team experiences with top management is to ensure that the team selects an organization that is interesting to team members. Students interested in nonprofit organizations have chosen to work with the executives of theatres, government bodies, the YMCA and even an organization of basketball referees. Business-oriented students have worked with a wide range of firms, from small family-run stores to huge conglomerates with sales exceeding six-hundred million dollars per year.

Two further prerequisites are that, to study top management, the organization must be within easy reach of transportation in Montreal, and must have several executives to study. If there are only a few executives, the organization might be acceptable, providing it is complex, engaged in very interesting projects, or growing very rapidly, thus providing a team of six students with adequate material for a two-semester study.

The process of finding an organization begins with teams being provided with a list of those organizations that have been studied in recent years, with the suggestion that, except in the case of large multi-divisional firms, most of these organizations will have been worked over quite thoroughly, and should not be approached. Teams then resort to every imaginable source they can muster to find a suitable organization. Many go through the Yellow Pages to get ideas (leading one enterprising team to work with the organization that prints the yellow pages!).

Conducting the Research Study

One view of the research portion of the field study is that this is an opportunity for students to develop rapport with their executives while building up a data base sufficient for them to do a credible job in the consulting portion of the study. The task of organizing a mass of data and observations provides a useful first immersion in organizational complexity to those students who have had little organizational experience. Similarly, the students' attempts to cope with an actual problem through team efforts are often their first experiences in managing group coordination and conflict.

Carrying through policy level research and consulting activities involves delving into sensitive matters, such as costs, finances, errors, inefficiencies, politics, and personalities, that executives do not feel comfortable in divulging to students. However, once students have developed rapport and have proven themselves worthy of executive trust, the stage is set for work beneficial to both parties. In fact, some teams must deal with the opposite of confidentiality, i.e., executive garrulousness and extreme openness, which can prove to be just as difficult a challenge.

First semester activities require neither feedback nor recommendations to the organization, since the data are mainly for the benefit of the student team. But the point is stressed to students that executives do learn from this initial process. Executives often challenge student ideas, producing an opportunity for mutual education. However, candidness at this stage has, on occasion, alienated students from executives, and students are warned to be very careful in what they feed back and to whom.

Conducting the Consulting Study

At the beginning of the second semester, in the consulting phase of the study, students negotiate with executives regarding one or more areas for concentrated study. Negotiation is usually necessary because the students must maintain their consulting activities at a top management level, whereas executives often prefer that students carry out a detailed study of marketing or finance procedures that properly belongs in the activities of a functional level course.

In conducting the consulting study, teams are encouraged to present alternatives, taking into account the pros and cons of competing recommendations, and where possible, to develop implementation steps. On occasion, a team sees the organization initiate action to take advantage of their recommendations. At the other extreme, when time does not permit, teams that have grappled with very complex situations sometimes complete only descriptive analyses, without going into recommendations. But this too can be beneficial; executives indicate that such reports are often more useful than studies with many but only superficial recommendations.

Sharing of Findings and Receiving of Feedback

Over a period of two semesters, the teams participate in a variety of informal discussions, sharing their findings with their executives and the class. In return, they receive feedback from the moment they attempt to gain entry into the organization and thereafter throughout the period of study. In many cases, the teams find that organizations *are* run according to "the book." In other situations, while connecting the world of concepts and the world of action students confront executives with new managerial concepts. One group of executives admitted that it was revelation to them that the students could substantiate their taking more risks in their marketing operations, and that the executives could benefit from going "back to their books" to update their knowledge of recent developments in management theory. Other executives claim that student ideas are "impractical" or "unrealistic," showing the students the gap that exists between the manager who must "meet a payroll" and the student who has only considered such matters as textbook exercises. The procedures developed for the field study are designed to allow students to reevaluate the situation after such criticism, and to find applications of concepts that do meet the needs of the working executive.

The authors have developed many of these procedures specifically for their unique program. However, recently the required text by Kubr (1976), and supplemental material by Paine and Naumes (1974) and Miller et al. (1977) have been used in place of some of the handouts originally used.

The field study provides students with an unusual opportunity to study the activities of top management, and a forbidding challenge in the main criterion used to assess the consulting report, i.e., executives must find the recommendations useful.

Conclusion

Our description has been presented in a positive vein. There are, of course, a good share of problems. For example, we have never been fully satisfied with our ability to put the theory across in the classroom per se. Reading still seems best coupled with application in the field organizations. Some theory discussion classes seem to work perfectly, others fall flat. We are still searching for the right formula. Likewise, the number of reports asked of the students (anywhere from two to seven) and the mix of descriptive and prescriptive ones, as well as the skills to be taught in the skill development sessions, have changed from year to year in an adaptive search for the right formula. We shall never find it, but we are enjoying the search.

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Note that certain details of the course have been changed since this publication, although the underlying philosophy remains unchanged.