International Journal of Scientific Research in Education (IJSRE)
ISSN: 1117-3259

The Operation of the Commerce Festival as an Activity Approach to Learning

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate changes in skills, motivation to learn and construction of knowledge in activity learning with business subjects through the operation of a Commerce Festival in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The results of this study clearly indicate the students' positive perceptions of skills improvement. Holding the Commerce Festival by conducting activity learning in business subjects created a positive atmosphere, which enhanced students' motivation to learn and develop generic skills. Nonetheless, there are areas in the activity learning approach that need improvement, such as task structure, students' readiness for activity learning and teachers' readiness for a paradigm shift in teaching practice.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Activity Approach, Learning, Commerce Festival, Business Subjects

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Cheung, C. K. & Emily, Y. M .N. (2010). The Operation of the Commerce Festival as an Activity Approach to Learning. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education, 3*(3), 132-140. Retrieved [DATE] from http://www.ijsre.com.

INTRODUCTION

Society is dynamic and changing at an increasingly rapid pace. Education in Hong Kong must keep abreast of the accelerated pace of change and provide opportunities for students to learn beyond the confines of the classroom. In business education, educators are being asked by the business sector to link theory and practice in real business contexts to face these challenges: to teach students to be life-long learners, to think critically, to develop creativity, and to co-operate and communicate harmoniously in a team (Cheung, 2008). This study aims to provide insights into activity learning in business subjects and how this learning approach can increase motivation and enhance the generic skills which are important in business.

The changing agenda of schooling and the wave of curriculum reform in Hong Kong

In attempting to maintain Hong Kong as a competitive economy, the traditional pattern of schooling will no longer be effective in ensuring the employability of the work force. Work in the contemporary world is characterized by its high mobility, flexibility and adaptability. Danish economists Lundvall and Johnson (1994) used the word "multi-skilling" to refer to the permanent innovation, unstable and highly competitive markets, new technologies and flexible

specialization of business management which are characteristics of the knowledge-based economy. They noted that in the knowledge economy:

> *First, there is a growing need for a broader participation in learning process. Swift and efficient innovation processes must involve all layers in the firm. Second, multi-skilling and networking skills become of crucial importance. Third, the capability to learn in and to apply learning to the processes of production and sales becomes the most important dimension to the viability of the modern firm. Management skills become related to the establishment of routines and rules which stimulate interactive learning.* (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994: 25-26)

This implies a holistic approach to learning in the workplace. It indicates that employers need workers who can take the initiative and solve problems not only in managerial and professional positions, but also in production and clerical work. Moreover, business is looking for employees who can work and learn effectively as part of a team. In this respect, companies will retain good workers if they are able to provide a working environment that not only stimulates productivity and application, but also fosters continual learning. Holistic learning in the workplace also imbues a company with a culture of sharing and acquiring new knowledge and skills. In order to prepare our students to be "multi-skilled" and increase their chances of employment, our present teaching practices should change to better suit the needs of a learning society. Watkins *et al*., (1996) described a learning society in which employment prospects relate more to the ability to enhance and transfer learning than to the accumulation of qualifications. In Hong Kong, the learning practice in school has traditionally been mainly concerned with learning content and an examination-driven syllabus. However, it is not enough to supply students early in life with a store of knowledge to be drawn on in their later life. Knowledge and skills tend to change rapidly, and everyone will need to know how to deal with unprecedented situations in the future. The first and most obvious requirement is that learning how to learn becomes a priority.

The reform proposals of the Education Commission for the Education System in Hong Kong 2000 elucidated the following aims of Education for the 21st Century as:

> *To enable every person to attain all-round development according to his/her own attributes in the domains of ethic, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics, so that he/ she is capable of life-long learning, critical and exploratory thinking, innovating and adapting to change; filled with self-confidence and a team spirit; willing to put forward continuing effort for the prosperity, progress, freedom and democracy of his/her society, and contribute to the future and well-being of the nation and the world at large.* (Education Commission, 2000)

In the domain of learning, the following aim was outlined as:

> *Our priority should be to enable our students to enjoy learning, enhance their effectiveness in communication and develop their creativity and sense of commitment.* (Education Commission, 2000)

To align with the aims of 21st Century of Education, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC, 2001) also suggested that generic skills should be built into the curriculum. These generic skills are considered to be essential for increasing opportunities for employment.

In an age of educational reforms, we, as business educators, should reflect on our teaching methods at all times. Our teaching pedagogy should no longer be a didactic one, but an approach which puts more focus on the teacher as a facilitator of students' learning. What can be done to help students acquire the generic skills and what can teachers do to make it happen? This study aims to explore this using an activity approach.

The school

Almost 99% of the student intake of the school in this study comprised academic under achievers. Recently, the school underwent a self-evaluation program, and a questionnaire survey on the learning attitudes and socio-economic status of students was conducted. The data collected revealed that 80% of the students were unmotivated in their learning, and the majority of the students believed that they were not really able to succeed in a world that defines success as passing standardized public examinations.

Not only do students in the school lack motivation to learn, many teachers are struggling with job satisfaction; they find their teaching is not helping students attain either academic or generic skills as stipulated in the educational reform documents.

Set against the low morale of teachers and poor motivation of the students, the researcher worked with four teachers of the Commerce Department in the school to try to create a positive atmosphere which enhanced students' motivation to learn and develop generic skills by implementing activity-learning in secondary business subjects.

Respondents were students from secondary four to secondary seven. The interviewees were thirteen students representative of each task group and four teachers from the Commerce Department and the data collection procedure lasted for half a year.

The Commerce Festival – an activity learning approach

This study made use of a Commerce Festival to enhance students' generic skills and their motivation to learn. Before launching the activities, an organizational chart of Committee members of the Commerce Festival including leaders of five task groups was set up. The various functional task groups consisted of: the promotional team, stall organizers, arts and craft team and presentation of the company start-up proposal. Each task group consisted of students from secondary four, five and seven classes. Also, each task group was assigned one business teacher as facilitator, whose role was to give more responsibility to students' own learning and to advise students regularly on their learning processes.

The Commerce Festival lasted for a week, and the schedule of events held was as follows:

i) Creating and editing material about the subjects taught in the Commerce Department and posted on ten pieces of white board for exhibition in the covered playground.
ii) Presentation of business proposal plans by four groups of students during the Assembly. This presentation was delivered to the audiences by soliciting their votes to invest in the potential company. In addition, teachers and the audiences gave marks and comments to each group.
iii) Holding a Fun Fair Day for charitable sales and stalls for playing commerce puzzles and games in the school hall.

Through the captioned series of activities, it was envisaged that the students who participated in the Commerce Festival would be able to apply their knowledge in business and, in doing so, enhance their generic skills such as creativity, communication and cooperation and motivation to learn.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The data collection instruments were questionnaires about student's participation in the Commerce Festival, and interviews with students and teachers. The questionnaire contained 25 questions; grouped into five major skill areas namely, management skills, inter-personal skills, communication skills, creativity skills and cooperation skills for students to express their feelings and beliefs about skills changes after the Commerce Festival. The interviews of teachers and students were recorded and transcribed to help the researcher in coding and analyzing the data gathered from the questionnaire survey.

The pilot

Realizing the importance of a pilot study, the researcher asked secondary four students to complete the questionnaire to ascertain its comprehensibility. It was found that they had no difficulty understanding the Chinese version of the questionnaire and interview questions except the term "traditional style of teaching", which I needed to rewrite in simple phrases like 'chalk and talk' teaching and 'one way communication' by the teacher to 'deliver knowledge in the classroom.' Amendments were made accordingly to improve clarity.

FINDINGS

Findings of the questionnaire for participants in the commerce festival

Table 1 Distribution of percentage for the skills surveyed

Types of skills	Strongly agreed or agreed (%)
Communication	84
Time management	81
Cooperation	81
Creative	52
Inter-personal	84

Overall, the results of the questionnaire survey showed that the students felt that the activities in the Commerce Festival helped them build skills. More than eighty percent of the students reported that they had improved in their time management skills, inter-personal skills, communication skills and cooperation skills.

However, in the area of creative skills, only around one-half (52%) of the respondents claimed improvement. It might be inferred from the respondents that students were not quite familiar with how to synthesize ideas in doing the real task. These responses indicated that the students were not dynamic learners, but were used to a spoon-feeding method of teaching and were not able to perceive and process information correctly. This showed that the students were not creative in exploiting applications and learning by trial and error and self-discovery.

Findings of the interviews with students

In the interviews, students were found to have similar perceptions of the learning process and motivation. The interview data show that the learning process was closely related to (a) students' perceptions of teaching method and learning style, and (b) the crucial factor of meta-learning in helping the students learning process.

One significant response was that 11 out of the 13 students expressed their fear and difficulty when they were told to do their own task and learning in this activity learning. The following quote sums this up nicely:

> *We felt it was very difficult because we had never embarked on a task by ourselves. Usually, we have teachers to guide us. Besides, we found that there was not enough time to complete the exhibition board. The feelings of difficulty gradually disappeared though*.

The learning mode adopted in the Commerce Festival was student-centered and based on independent learning. The teacher acted as a resource and provided guidance and directions. The interview data indicated that the majority of subjects felt very anxious in the first two days of the activity learning. This was because students were accustomed to the usual teacher-centered style based on teachers` "spoon feeding" of knowledge. They had not previously experienced self-learning and discovery learning and this resulted in "fears, stress, and difficulty" upon knowing that they were responsible for their own learning. It took them some time to recompose their feelings with the help of the mediation and assistance of the facilitators (teachers) and the capable members in the group. This mediation was in line with the theory underpinning Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the 'Zone of proximal development'.

When the initial fear of difficulty had passed, students started to pick up, and they seemed to enjoy activities to be incorporated in the classroom to help them gain more understanding in the subject knowledge. The following extracts express their feelings

> *Activities conducted beyond the confines of classroom are more lively and interesting because I have participated in the task and even played with the games on the Fun Fair Day, which impressed me very much. This kind of learning helped me to retain subject knowledge easily in my memory.*

Findings indicated the students' interest in activity learning beyond the confines of classroom. They perceived activity learning to be more experiential learning and valued interactions with teachers. Most important of all, the activity learning was interesting and motivating for students and subsequently led to intrinsic motivation.

Construction of Knowledge

The outcome of the learning process was the active construction of knowledge on the part of the students through activities in the Commerce Festival. The students enjoyed the activity learning and were able to construct their own knowledge. The following extract is an example:

> *I enjoy this kind of learning approach because it required students' participation in learning and awareness of learning responsibility. After all, we secondary students need to enhance ours skills in creativity, communication and cooperation and increase our motivation to learn. It gave me a sense of achievement in the construction of knowledge that I was able to integrate knowledge in Business Studies and Principles of Accounts. I presented the researched material such as: procedure of setting up company, capital cost, budgeting, pricing of product, advertising and promotion of sales, and planning of human resources into the task.*

Findings highlighted that students had to go through the cycles of meta-learning. In the activity learning, students were encouraged to reflect on their learning. They were asked by the teachers, who acted as facilitators, to be explicit about what they had got out of this learning experience. They accomplished the learning task by searching for analogies, relating new information to previous knowledge, analyzing the knowledge, and identifying and applying what was helping their learning. They were able to relate knowledge across subjects to the activities carried out. Their participation in the groups was high. They were resourceful in collecting information to discuss with their group members. They reached a consensus through a gradual process of collective discovery of learning, negotiation and joint decision making to reach solutions. The interview data reflected that they gained interest in learning business subjects. These students generally enjoyed the activity learning, which gave them greater awareness of the business environment. This happened because the activities in the Commerce Festival contained elements of current business news. Besides, they were in control of their own learning, and the ability to integrate different subject domains of business subjects helped them to build confidence and gain a sense of achievement. In all, the students, who were able to construct knowledge, gained mastery of study skills after participating in activity learning. These skills included gathering, classifying, summarizing and presenting materials, and being more organized in the use of time in their studies. These skills will eventually lead to life-long learning skills in the future. In general, the students were able to view activity learning as the construction of knowledge and meaning.

Improvement of skills

Most of the students interviewed acknowledged that they had improved in generic skills, notably cooperation, communication, time management, and interpersonal skills after the activity learning. These results also tallied with the survey conducted in the questionnaire survey. The results indicated that there was positive interdependence in the group and that all the members were able to divide up the work, respect each other's opinions, communicate and share resources and contribute to the accomplishment of mutual goals. Furthermore, students respected each other's opinion and valued group members' contributions to communication, cooperation and conflict management. These skills were indispensable to each group's success. The following extract from a student interview sums this up well:

> *Good team spirit is very important to accomplish the task. I have improved my communication skills in that I conversed precisely with my group members. Whenever there was diversity of opinions, our group members would listen and respect each other and then decide by votes. We had good cooperation in our group; otherwise we could not have finished our task in time. We divided our task into sub-tasks and then individually worked on the task agreed. I also appreciated my group members' contribution for the accomplishment of the task.*

Although in general students perceived there that there had been an improvement in generic skills, as with the results from the questionnaire survey, later interviews confirmed that their improvement in creative skills was very limited:

Regarding the creative skills, there is no improvement in creativity. Because, we just put all the materials which were provided by the teacher on the exhibition board. Moreover, we should have preferred the teacher to give us the solutions to our task problems.

Students in Hong Kong are in general rote learners accustomed to a surface learning approach. Surface motivated students reproduce what teachers want them to do. Usually, students do not see interconnections between the subject matter and the significance of what they have learned. However, Johnson and Johnson (1991:31) argued that "creativity is not a characteristic of a person but rather the result of certain types of interaction among individuals." They pointed out that no effective problem-solving can take place without some amount of creativity. They also stated that "the ability to engage in divergent thinking, to take risks in solving problems, and to engage in open controversy are all aspects of creative interaction (ibid)." In line with the review by Johnson & Johnson, the findings illuminated in hindsight that task design determined divergent thinking, the amount of creative thinking. Take, for instance, the task in the Commerce Festival, the exhibition board, which did not require much creative thinking, and so the subjects only searched for material or received the material from the teacher and stapled it to the boards. In general, cooperation skills are the essential core element in a successful group, where group members support and help each other and thereby, foster trust and effective communication with each other.

Interviews with teachers

Four teachers of the Commerce Department were interviewed. From the interviews, it was apparent that their main role in this activity learning program was to act as facilitators to provide guidance to the students to accomplish the task.

As for attainment of the goal of the activity learning in the Commerce Festival, there were divided opinions from the four interviewees. Two interviewees, referred to as Teacher A and Teacher B in the interview, felt that the activity learning approach had achieved its goal because the students were able to integrate knowledge across subjects and develop their skills. The other two interviewees (referred to as Teacher C and Teacher D in the interview data) had reservations about the fulfillment of the goal. Teacher C observed that not all students had achieved the integration of knowledge in the activities undertaken. Teachers A and B were more positive about the students' meta-cognition and self-learning skills as manifested in the activities. Below are the quotes from the first two interviewees:

Basically, the learning goal of the activity learning was achieved especially the Business Start-up Proposal. I recall that a group with the proposal to sell educational toys and kits to children was able to think deeply about the task. They considered socio-economic factors like low birth rate of the community: the majority of people would have only one child. As a result of this, the family would certainly invest resources for the child's education. This group had researched statistical data to support their reasons for selling the educational data. I could see they had the business acumen to start up a company. All in all, this group knew how to relate their subject knowledge across subjects like Business Studies, Commerce and Principles of Accounts, and even Computer Application like Power Point Presentation, so as to accomplish the task. It was really not easy to piece the fragmentation of commerce subjects together and construct the knowledge in the task. They did a good job. Besides this group, other groups were in control of their own learning. As regards the generic skills, there was cooperation, trust and communication. In addition, students made a lot of improvements in problem solving skills when they learned that the companies could not donate goods for the charity sale. They were disappointed in the first instance; then, they discussed this matter by themselves and solved the problem by making posters for soliciting the whole school to donate stuff like" soft toys, stationery, and other accessories etc. (Teacher A)

The other two interviewees (Teacher C and Teacher D) revealed that they had reservations about the learning goal; however, certain improvements in classroom behavior like off-task behavior and students' concentration levels were noted, as in the following quotes:

Some of the students were passive in the process of learning in that they were quite reluctant regarding independent learning. They completely relied on the resources that I provided to them and put them on the

exhibition board. However, some students did gain interest in learning commerce subjects through participating in the Commerce Festival. Their levels of concentration were comparatively higher than before participating in the activity learning. There were less off-task behaviors since after that. (Teacher C)

These comments indicate that the nature of the task assigned determined the level of construction of knowledge in the activity learning approach. This has further implications for studies in this area.

Regarding the improvement of generic skills, four interviewees were of the same view that the students gained generic skills, especially in the areas of cooperation, communication, time management, conflict management and interpersonal skills.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The questionnaire data obtained from students participating in the Commerce Festival indicated that there were improvements in participants' skills. This was also supported by the positive comments in the interviews with teachers and representative participants of each task group. In light of the reservation about this activity learning approach as reflected in the comments made by some teachers and students, further developments and refinements would be expected to make the activity learning approach more acceptable for students' development of cognitive and affective skills.

There are three major aspects evident in the questionnaire survey and interviews. These are: (a) learning method and learning process, (b) learning environment and skills development, and (c) task structure, which are all discussed in the following paragraphs.

With reference to learning method and learning process, it is evident that activity learning is distinctly different from traditional learning conducted in classrooms. This activity learning aims to transform students' learning from passive to active approaches, and this transformation requires students' to be in control of the learning process to acquire knowledge. As Stern and Huber (1997:39) pointed out, "self-regulation by learners of the various phases of the learning process, which include, among others, goal setting, planning, monitoring, and assessment, leads to construction of new knowledge in the learner's mind." If the designed activity learning is to bring about students' meta-learning and independent learning, then a major responsibility falls on teachers. A concerned, caring approach on the part of teachers highlights the quality of student-teacher relationships. Though the activity learning in the Commerce Festival relied on students' accepting responsibility for their own learning, it was still important for teachers to show care and facilitate the students' learning process. Students felt supported when teachers showed their commitment and assumed a share of responsibility for their learning. It was clearly evident from the interviews that students were relieved by being able to refer their problems to the teachers for guidance. In general, teachers were more concerned with process than product, and with encouraging exploration and the development of skills. There was a paradigm shift in the teacher's role from knowledge transmitter to facilitator.

The learning process in this case study of activity learning reflected Piaget's (1950) major emphasis on learners as *active* meaning-makers rather than passive 'recipients' of knowledge. This had an impact on the role of teachers as learning facilitators, who saw students as resources for one another. Students were given more space to learn and for self-reflection on their own learning. However, further interviews indicated that not all students became involved in some activities, and some students were not ready for this kind of discovery learning. A possible explanation is that the meta-learning skills need to be developed and taught gradually from the beginning of school.

With regard to the learning environment and skills development, it was evident that the events held in the Commerce Festival contained a social and cultural environment which required students' active participation in decision making and appreciation for individual differences. Prominent researchers like Vygostoky (1978) and Bruner (1972) take full account of the social and cultural contexts of learning, given that schools are socially and culturally organized institutions. There is evidence that the students had developed positive attitudes towards subject areas, team members and task activities in the socio-cultural environment of the Commerce Festival. These activities could not have taken place if students had worked individually. Through a division of labor and a shared responsibility for goal accomplishment, students shared each member's resources and worked cooperatively in groups. Students who were particularly capable and conscientious were definitely able to carry out the meta-learning cycle. They went through the two connected cycles reviewing, learning and application to accomplish the task and to give help to less capable ones. In this socio-cultural context of learning, knowledge construction through the mediation of more capable others would take place, reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the 'zone of proximal development'. As revealed by the comments given by the students interviewed and the survey results, there was a clear perception of improvement in the skills. The

efficacy of the activity learning approach on skills was especially noted in the areas of cooperation, communication, time management, and interpersonal. The activity learning also mirrored the real world of work where there is increasing need for students to solve problems together. For instance, when students found that their soliciting for donations of goods for charitable sale failed, they resolved this through discussion of various alternative solutions and solicited internally from school sources. The more the students are exposed to this authentic context of learning, the more the students will develop their employability skills in areas of problem-solving, team work and critical thinking.

The Commerce Festival task was perceived to be difficult as evidenced by students' expressions of fear and worry in the interviews. Tasks are an important part of activity learning. Whether the tasks can activate the three systems of thinking (self-system, meta-cognitive system and cognitive) as developed by Tileston (2000) will depend on several factors. These include the students' perceptions of their ability to succeed, the students' current state of subject knowledge and the appropriate task structure and support given by the teachers as facilitators. Appropriate tasks included balancing "breadth and depth" as in the Business Start-up Proposal. Games stalls for commerce quizzes and puzzles stimulated students' higher order thinking skills, creativity skills and construction of knowledge. Once students had positive self-efficacy about the task, their meta-cognitive systems became engaged. The meta-cognitive systems then facilitated learning goals, problem solving skill and self-reflection skills. Once the meta-cognitive system was engaged, it was in communication with the third system, the cognitive system. The cognitive system enabled students to process information, compare and classify. In this way, knowledge was constructed and applied to the task.

Throughout the process of activity learning, help and motivation from teachers was particularly critical to the accomplishment of the tasks in the Commerce Festival. Teachers needed to monitor the groups as they worked for the Commerce Festival. The teacher played the important role of carefully monitoring how well the groups were functioning. Teachers needed to intervene when problems were out of the group's control. From the interview data, it was found that Teacher B facilitated the process of doing this by re-directing the groups of Business Start-up Proposal back on the right track.

From the interviews of students doing the exhibition board, it is clear that students of this group were accustomed to traditional spoon-feeding and tended to solicit help from teacher often. They all perceived that there was no improvement in creativity and construction of knowledge because the teacher just gave all the materials to them whenever they asked. Hence, it is crucial for teachers to change their mind set from "learning transmitter" to "learning facilitator".

CONCLUSION

The purpose of holding the Commerce Festival through activity learning was to provide a means whereby students were able to develop generic skills and motivation to learn. It was also hoped that students would internalize these skills to be life long learners. The responses from the subjects in the survey and interviews affirmed the effectiveness of the approach in learning commerce subjects. They agreed that the learning environment helped to promote cooperation and knowledge building.

Having engaged students in activity learning, there are three implications arising from the case study. First, students and teachers held similar views about the changes in students' generic skills such as, cooperation, communication, interpersonal, and motivation to learn after participating in the Commerce Festival. They agreed that more interaction and harmonious relationships developed in the activity learning approach. As Johnson and Johnson (1988:34) stated, " being able to perform technical skills such as reading, speaking, listening, writing, computing, problem-solving, etc., are valuable but of little use if the person cannot apply those skills in cooperative interaction with other people in career, family, and community settings."

Second, the activation of the meta-learning cycle is conducive to the learning process. The paradigm shift in teaching from knowledge transmission to knowledge facilitation is of paramount importance in developing students' life-long learning skills. Teaching should not just focus on students' performance in relation to curriculum tasks and public examination results. There is a long-term need to foster students' development in generic skills and social responsibility to cope with the complex, fast moving nature of modern economies and society.

In conclusion, activity learning provides students with learning experiences to develop skills in several areas: problem-solving, communication, cooperation, decision making, uses of information technology to search material and construct knowledge, and improving student motivation and understanding. All these skills are vital in the work place. Furthermore, learning activities which involve team work, problem solving and analyzing will better prepare students to adapt in the workplace in the future.

Limitations of the Study

The study includes only those students who participated in the events held in the Commerce Festival. Those commerce students who were not responsible for launching the Commerce Festival were excluded for ease of control of task members and time. The scope of this study was limited to senior form students in the commerce stream; therefore, no attempt was made to extend the findings beyond this level of students. The impact of the low economic status of students could have been examined and probed in the interviews in order to gain deeper understanding of students' negative feeling to learning.

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