

WORKSHOP: USING THE RESOURCES OF THE GROUP TO COME UP WITH INDIVIDUAL SOLUTIONS TO ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN THE WORKPLACE (C1/C1+)

Abstract: The workshop presented here is based on techniques used in different classes. It has been designed to give an overview of different activities that have been conducted several times in different groups to try and address the issue of helping students acquire transferrable problem-solving skills and autonomy when working in large groups.

Keywords: autonomy, problem-solving, group resources, interactions

WARSZTATY: WYKORZYSTANIE ZASOBÓW GRUPY W CELU UZYSKANIA INDYWIDUALNYCH ROZWIĄZAŃ PROBLEMÓW ETYCZNYCH W MIEJSCU PRACY (C1/C1+)

Abstrakt: Przedstawione tutaj warsztaty oparte są na technikach stosowanych w różnych klasach. Zaprezentowane ćwiczenia, które zostały przeprowadzone kilkakrotnie w różnych grupach, mają na celu umożliwienie studentom zdobycia umiejętności rozwiązywania problemów i wykorzystania autonomii podczas pracy w dużych grupach.

Słowa kluczowe: autonomia, rozwiązywanie problemów, zasoby grupy, interakcje

1. Introduction

The workshop has been created to demonstrate how problem-solving activities can be organised in university classes. The idea is to develop problem-solving skills instead of transferring knowledge to students. What matters is the solving process and not the solution(s) found.

Students also practise group activities to help them understand how useful group resources can be. It also serves the purpose of dealing with overcrowded classes.

The article will deal with the background of the workshop, then the reluctances of students and lastly with the role of the teacher in overcoming them.

2. Background difficulties

The group activities have been designed to address a difficulty encountered in MA degree classes, but similar activities can be imagined for all levels. In the course of an MA degree, the classes are organised with both lectures (dealing with Ethics in the Workplace) and corresponding seminars that should permit students to reflect and go further into the topics.

In the seminar groups, there are between 30 and 40 students, and the sessions last 90 minutes every week (10 weeks all in all). Given the number of students, it is essential to rely on group interactions so that all participants get a chance to be really active during the sessions.

Moreover, the idea is to prepare students for their (coming-soon) future working life by enabling them to acquire transferrable problem-solving techniques and not just ready-to-apply solutions. To reach this goal, we induce them to be creative and reflexive by not giving them pre-packaged answers, thus avoiding solutionism, which according to Alvesson and Spicer in their book *The Stupidity Paradox* (2017), leads to structural difficulties in companies.

3. Principles underlying the design of the workshop

The workshop was inspired by work conducted in Groupe Français d'Education Nouvelle research groups.¹

The first idea underlying the design of the activities is that everybody is able to perform given the adequate stimulation and inducement. The job of the teacher is thus to create this stimulation.

The second principle is that a group is always more than just the sum of the different members. Thus, the activities have to be interesting enough to create motivation in the students and require the members of each group to collaborate to reach a solution to the problem, hence questions like “what would you (as a group) do?” and instructions like “you have to reach a compromise/you have to agree on one solution.”

¹ GFEN Secteur Langues Centre Associatif Boris Vian 13 avenue Marcel Paul 69200, Vénissieux. GFEN is an association for research and cross-training in education.

The third idea is to organise things so that real interaction between different groups is necessary and becomes a natural part of the problem-solving process. This is particularly beneficial in language classes, when students who have the same mother tongue are supposed to negotiate and work in a foreign language, which is absolutely not natural for them.

4. The workshop activities

Each small group (4 students) receives a case-study scenario. There are 3 different scenarios, so several groups work with the same one. Each scenario exists in two versions, the second one with an added detail that might influence the final decision. This permits students to reflect deeper and examine their reasons for reaching this particular decision.

For instance, as a team leader, they are supposed to share a bonus between the different team members (scenario 1B) in any way they want. In scenario 1A, there is an added condition: not everybody can receive the same amount.

The small groups first try to find a solution to their problem then they are asked to compare their solution with the solutions found by groups working on the slightly modified scenario (1A with 1B). They will then be asked to find out whether the extra detail/instruction added has raised extra problems or helped the final decision.

Last, the groups will have to perform a role play (2 situations they can choose from) to reuse and explain the arguments prepared and exchanged during negotiation.

5. Reluctances of students

The difficulties experienced in this type of workshop are of several kinds. First, the average student likes solutionism because it feels safe (you learn = you pass).

Second, the way the educational system is organised in France means that students are not used to problems to which there is no universal "right" solution, and they will always feel insecure when being left free to create an original solution. Sometimes, they will even doubt the ability of the teacher to solve the situation him/herself.

Nevertheless, not having any ready solution means that any solution is acceptable, provided it is logical and realistic, which means that students are treated as responsible adults. It also prefigures the reality they will encounter in their working life. Not every student is willing to behave as an adult and initial trials have to be safe ones.

Then, some participants may be reluctant during the fourth step (role playing), because they may be afraid of being exposed (to criticism?).

6. Role of the teacher

The teacher will have to convince the students to accept these unusual activities.

It implies that such workshops are more efficient when there is already a trust relationship between the teacher and the students. To reinforce this trust, the teacher should try to remain neutral at all times, whatever the solutions the students come up with. It is sometimes difficult to remember, when you are a teacher, that you are not supposed to know everything better and that you should remain in the background, not at the front of stage.

Groups should also be organised to encourage diversity (male/female, different origins) as this fosters exchanges and debates.

Finding or creating the right materials can also be a conundrum. The materials used here have been either invented by the teacher or adapted from existing material. For this particular workshop, there were in fact 3 different situations, each one existing in two different versions.

The teacher should also create conditions to ensure that English is used for the interactions, as it is difficult to supervise all the groups at the same time. We can try and solve the problem by encouraging diversity in the groups, but also by creating a final activity (here a role play) in which students perform better if they have used English during the previous steps. It is also an acquired taste and becomes more natural after similar workshops.

Even if trust needs to be established as the first thing because some activities can appear to be “dangerous” for the self-esteem of the participants, and students need to feel that everything they say will be received with benevolence, it is sometimes necessary to push people out of their comfort zone if you want them to make progress, as long as it is done with kindness and empathy.

Most importantly, autonomy in students can only be developed if the teacher is willing to step aside and forget his/her central role. We see clearly that the teacher will first imagine the scenarios and collect documents when preparing the workshops, which is a long and difficult task. Then, during the workshops/seminars, the teacher will remain in the background, supervising, helping, re-directing, managing the technical details but not speaking from a position of authority as the person who “knows better.” This requires a major shift in how teachers see their role and is probably the greatest obstacle standing in the way of students’ autonomy.

7. Conclusion

Autonomy is one of the most important qualities cited by companies when recruiting employees. Therefore, it should also be one of the top priorities of university teachers.

Autonomy in students can only appear if the students feel authorised to think independently. Therefore, the teacher is in charge of creating a safe class environment in which there is no judgement. Of course, he or she will give students access to knowledge but, more importantly, help them learn how to use this knowledge to devise original solutions to the problems they will encounter in their professional environment. The teacher no longer gives “right” answers but asks questions and allows the students themselves to find their individual solutions to them.

In other words, the teacher has to accept no longer being a “manager” as such, but rather taking on the role of a “coach” to enable students to become more autonomous.

Bibliography

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I. Outline of the workshop

Step one:

Read the situation and think about it for 5 min on your own.

Step two:

Discuss the situation with the members of your group (max 4 people). You have to reach a decision. (20 min)

Step three:

Discuss the situation with the members of the corresponding group (1A → 1B). Try to find out whether the slight difference in the situations has any influence on the final decision. (20 min)

Step four:

Role play. Choose one of the two potential scenarios. Prepare for 5 min. The participating students will be chosen at random. They are given 2 or 3 mins to choose who is going to do what.

II. PRINTED DOCUMENTS GIVEN TO THE DIFFERENT GROUPS (AT LEAST 6)**SITUATION 1 A** (invented)

The CEO has decided to give a bonus to the best workers in the company.

Each team leader is allowed/granted a fixed amount and they can share it in any way they want. Their own potential bonus is included in the global amount.

There is only one rule: not everybody is supposed to get a bonus as it is supposed to come as a reward for excellent work.

What are the different possibilities for the team leader? What are the upsides and downsides of each solution?

What would you do? Why?

SITUATION 1 B (invented)

The CEO has decided to give a bonus to the best workers in the company.

Each team leader is allowed/granted a fixed amount and they can share it in any way they want. Their own potential bonus is included in the global amount.

What are the different possibilities for the team leader? What are the upsides and downsides of each solution?

What would you do? Why?

SITUATION 2 A

(adapted from the Institute of Business Ethics, https://www.ibe.org.uk/userassets/otherpdfs/scenario_honesty.pdf [accessed: 17 July 2020])

A new VP has just been recruited in the company and has decided to organise a team-building session.

In the morning, there is a staff meeting during which people are asked to suggest ways to improve the functioning of the company.

Jane D., the HR manager, is the facilitator in charge of heading this meeting.

When some employees start sharing their concerns, she says that she is “only interested in solutions, not problems.”

After a while, people understand and switch to a more positive tone.

Over lunch, the discussion is only about the soon-to-come Christmas holidays.

The afternoon is spent playing different sports.

Jane’s assistant, Pat, notices that some intense conversations in threes and twos take place in corridors, over coffee or in the rest rooms.

The next day, Jane says to her assistant: “It went well, don’t you think?”

What should Pat answer? What are the risks and advantages of the different possible answers?

What would you answer?

SITUATION 2 B

(adapted from the Institute of Business Ethics https://www.ibe.org.uk/userassets/otherpdfs/scenario_honesty.pdf [accessed: 17 July 2020])

A new VP has just been recruited in the company and has decided to organise a team-building session.

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The next day, Jane says to her assistant: “It went well, don’t you think?”

Context: Jane is about to become VP in another branch of the company and she has suggested Pat should replace her as head of HR.

What should Pat answer? What are the risks and advantages of the different possible answers?

What would you answer?

SITUATION 3 A

(adapted from the Institute of Business Ethics https://www.ibe.org.uk/userassets/otherpdfs/scenario_news.pdf [accessed: 17 July 2020])

You work in the marketing department of a multinational organisation which owns and manages tea plantations in a developing country. The organisation’s advertising emphasises the organisation’s “partnership with the developing world.” In recent weeks, the organisation has been the subject of a series of critical articles in a national paper. The articles have contained detailed data about the pay and conditions on the plantations and have described those pay and conditions as exploitative. The newspaper has also commented unfavourably on the arrangements that the organisation has made with the country’s government for the repatriation of profits. The information in the articles has been accurate, and it is evident that a member of the organisation has been supplying the information, although the organisation has a rule that a member of staff “must not disclose commercial information to unauthorised persons” and another one which says that “all contacts with the press must be handled by the properly authorised officers.”

At a social function, a member of your department inadvertently makes it plain that it is s/he who has been supplying the information to the newspaper. S/he immediately recognises what s/he has done and says you “must ignore what I’ve said or I’ll be sacked.”

What are the possible courses of action? Pros and cons?

What would you do? Why?

SITUATION 3 B

(adapted from the Institute of Business Ethics, https://www.ibe.org.uk/userassets/otherpdfs/scenario_news.pdf [accessed: 17 July 2020])

You work in the marketing department of a multinational organisation, which owns and manages tea plantations in a developing country. The organisation’s advertising emphasises the organisation’s “partnership with the developing world.” In recent weeks, the organisation has been the subject of a series of critical articles in a national paper. The articles have contained detailed data about the pay and conditions on the plantations and have described those pay and conditions as exploitative. The newspaper has also commented unfavourably on the arrangements that the organisation has made with the country’s government for the repatriation of profits. The information in the articles has been accurate, and it is evident that a member of the organisation has been supplying the information, although the organisation has a rule that a member of staff “must not disclose commercial information to unauthorised persons” and another one which says that “all contacts with the press must be handled by the properly authorised officers.”

At a more personal level, you have been an activist for an international group involved in Fair Trade for years. You are also a trade unionist.

At a social function, a member of your department inadvertently makes it plain that it is s/he who has been supplying the information to the newspaper. S/he immediately recognises what s/he has done and says you “must ignore what I’ve said or I’ll be sacked.”

What are the possible courses of action? Pros and cons?

What would you do? Why?

III. SCENARIOS FOR ROLE PLAYS

Situations 1 A and 1 B

- a) The team leader explains to the CEO the solution s/he has chosen and why. (role play)
- b) The team leader meets with two representatives of the staff to justify her/his decision. (role play)

Situations 2 A and 2 B

- a) Pat answers Jane. Imagine the following conversation. (role play)
- b) Imagine a conversation between Pat and other team members who criticise Jane for being totally blind to their problems. (role play)

Situations 3 A and 3 B

- a) You have decided to report the co-worker. You want to give them a chance to inform the company themselves. Imagine the conversation between you and the co-worker. (role play)
- b) You have decided not to report the co-worker, but you insist on involving them in an action to push the company to straighten its act. Imagine the conversation. (role play)
- c) You have decided to report the co-worker. Imagine the conversation between you and the Marketing VP. (role play)