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Liberal education is both discipline-based and multidisciplinary. It can provide a broad knowledge base and cultivate critical reasoning skills. Both are essential for the effective practitioner. They can be fostered by an increased interplay between continuing professional education, continuing liberal education, and the realities of professional life. Examples from practice can provide the basis for a curriculum that effectively increases this interplay. This article describes some valuable program development strategies that can enhance programs for practitioners.

Shaping Habits of the Mind

The Role of Liberal Education in the Improvement of Practice

Recently we had a conversation with an executive from a well established and financially stable business. He was a member of the organization's team of senior executives charged with making the changes that would be necessary to see the organization successfully into its second century.

As we spoke, he outlined the present and talked about his view of the elusive future. From his perspective, competition was increasing. Remaining competitive meant both tighter cost control and continuous improvement of products and services. More responsibility was being given to those on the organization's front lines. In addition, the business was also shifting its methods for developing, producing, and refining products and services. It now valued ideas from all levels of the organization, because finding imaginative and viable responses to a changing market place was essential.

The executive said that while more traditional management duties were being pushed to the organization's operating levels, those at higher echelons of management were being asked to take on more complex responsibilities. Senior practitioners were leading an ongoing assessment of market forces. Senior managers had increasing responsibility for identifying promising opportunities for and threats to the organization. They were now leading the organization's increasingly multiethnic and multiracial work force.

As he and his colleagues saw it, the enterprise needed to move beyond the routine application of

organizational policy and meeting production quotas. It would no longer be enough to keep things running in the traditional ways and to avoid mistakes. As the organization moves toward the future, managers at all levels need to analyze, assess, interpret, synthesize, judge, act, and take responsibility. In sum, he was telling us that, if the organization was to move successfully into that elusive future in the face of today's pattern of rapid change, all in the organization were going to have to think regularly and learn continuously.

The general issues raised in this conversation were not unique. We have had conversations of this kind with executives from other businesses, health care organizations, public agencies, government, professional firms, arts organizations, and the military. Many are making or considering changes that will require practitioners who have those advanced reasoning and learning abilities mentioned above or who are able to acquire them.

After such conversations, we wonder, how must our curricula change to better serve practitioners in changing organizations? What are the implications for higher education overall? What resources do colleges and universities have that can be tapped to meet this educational challenge? How deeply must we rethink our own assumptions about and approaches to the education of effective practitioners?

The Advantages of Liberal Education

Liberal education has long been considered to be one of the components that most effectively cultivates breadth and depth of knowledge and critical reasoning skills such as analysis, assessment, interpretation, synthesis, imagination, creativity, and judgment. In the strongest liberal education curricula, a student is introduced to the fundamental knowledge and the conceptual structure of each discipline studied. Students learn how each discipline approaches the analysis of issues, the identification and interpretation of evidence, the structuring of an argument, and the making of judgments. This distinctive discipline-based yet multidisciplinary education pushes the student to reason within and across disciplines, within and across alternative ways of understanding an individual problem or the larger configuration of human dilemmas.

Effective practitioners must be prepared to look at each problem and opportunity with a fresh eye. They must be able to gather the new information needed for a more complete understanding of the issue at hand. They must have the critical reasoning skills necessary to analyze issues, interpret information, imagine alternatives, judge carefully, and act responsibly. They must have the agility of mind needed to work with others in order to "turn" a problem and see its possibilities from a number of distinctive angles.

Given the broad knowledge and advanced reasoning skills that effective practitioners need today, liberal education seems to have many promising features that could enhance our continuing professional education programming. How can we draw upon the key resources of liberal education? How can we integrate continuing liberal and continuing professional education? What kind of educational program can help form

a lasting bond between the broader knowledge gained, the critical skills acquired, and the professional practice we had intended to influence?

From our perspective, the most promising foundation upon which to build an educational program that successfully joins continuing liberal education, continuing professional education, and professional practice is the practice itself. That is, if we are right in our judgment that the realities of professional practice today demand a substantial education, extensive critical reasoning skills, and continuous learning, then examples from practice should provide the right ground and guide for a curriculum that effectively meets those demands. In short, we are suggesting the creation of programs that are an ongoing dialogue between education and professional practice.

Developing a Multidisciplinary Program

Take any profession and focus on a broader issue or challenge faced by a practitioner, and you have the basis for planning an effective multidisciplinary program that achieves the desired goals. For example, look at the health care profession and focus on the issue of care for the aging. If we were going to plan a program for health care administrators, we could base one segment on this issue. The primary goal of that segment would be to educate the effective health care practitioner. The care of the aging would serve primarily as an example of how practitioners can make the best use of existing knowledge, how they can cultivate and use critical reasoning skills, and how they can gain the new knowledge needed to effectively address the issues at hand.

There are many ways to approach the question of care for the aging and to achieve the disciplined-based multidisciplinary approach that characterizes liberal education. The care of the aging includes economic as well as political considerations, religion and belief issues, psychological concerns, cultural and sociological problems, and ethical questions. Each of these disciplines gives the practitioner a body of knowledge about aging and a distinctive approach to problem analysis.

An issue like care of the aging also poses questions for the health care administrator about facilities, resource and staff management, leadership, community relations, legislative involvement, and the like. These are interconnected with the broader understandings about aging in our society. A program based on examples from practice can highlight how depth of knowledge of and the ability to reason through alternatives and choices make a significant difference in a practitioner's ability to solve "real world" problems. A program that draws on the relevant academic and professional disciplines, with a focus on a common set of examples or cases from practice, gives the practitioner an interconnected continuing liberal and a continuing professional education with a clear link to the realities of professional life.

To plan a program of this kind requires an innovative approach. Whether the program in question is a single seminar or a degree program, little of it can readily be put together from the existing offerings in most colleges and universities. This means that those of us interested in creating

this kind of program for practitioners must play a very active role in program development. We must outline initial concepts, work closely with practitioners and faculty to shape the final program, draw the institution's resources together from a variety of disciplines, and foster a strong working relationship among them for the duration of the program. Thus, program development becomes a highly collaborative process involving faculty, practitioners, and the program's academic administrator. An effective program should be a dialogue between education and practice. There should be an active interchange between the insights gained through practice and the insights gained through formal study and research.

Further, we propose no limits on format. We suggest a fresh approach to the intermixing of periods of study and periods of practice. The collaborative approach to program development should lead to formats that support the development of the practitioner over time. These new formats may challenge existing ideas about the relationships between education and practice.

Developing a program that interconnects disciplines in the classroom as they are interconnected in practice requires that faculty do more than just their "piece of it." For the program to remain potently whole, faculty must work as a team—one that understands the goals of the program and the role of each faculty member, student, and administrator in achieving those goals.

We realize that such innovative programs that draw broadly on the institution's resources can present a variety of challenges, ranging from the practical problems of costs to the theoretical and political problems involved in working across disciplines. But we believe that programs based on examples from practice can bring together an institution's liberal and professional educational resources and link them to the realities of professional life. Such thoughtfully crafted programs are the most promising way to educate the effective practitioners who are so essential for our future. The potential strength and effectiveness of such programs can make them compelling for institutions, faculty members, and practitioners—all of whom may be willing to invest much more in an educational effort if the returns are indeed higher.

Program Development at the University of Virginia

At the University of Virginia, we have actually begun to develop and offer such programs. Our first attempts have been in business programs, in multicultural programs for teachers, and in programs for health care professionals. As we refine these strategies, we will be extending them to other programs. Thus far, we have found some ways to strengthen existing continuing professional education programming. These strategies also give us a way to address some of the curricular challenges (outlined above) one step at a time.

First, our program development team now takes a much more interactive approach to program development. We are involving individuals from the target group of practitioners early in the planning

stages of each program. This interaction helps us to better understand the issues at hand and the larger national and international context of the practice. We can then begin to outline the interconnected components of the program. We start with an assumption that most complex issues facing practitioners require a multidisciplinary educational response. Early conversations with a wide range of faculty and with other members of our program development staff help to ensure that we approach each new program with appropriate depth and breadth.

We then try to capture the essentials of the rough program concept in a narrative program description that facilitates further conversations that focus on refining the program as a whole. We identify faculty from a variety of relevant disciplines who can give the program its final shape in an ongoing exchange with practitioners. The program narrative gives us a good tool for explaining the sensibility of the rough program concept to faculty. For faculty from disciplines in the arts and sciences who are not often called upon to participate in programs for practitioners, the narrative makes it easier to see how their areas of expertise fit into the program.

We have also begun to have more meetings of all the faculty participating in a program prior to its start. For larger programs, at least one group meeting early in the planning process and one closer to the starting date have proven valuable. These meetings help to ensure strong connections between sessions or courses within a program.

Another strategy we are implementing is the use of cases prepared by registrants in a program. These cases are based on problems that registrants are facing in their own work places. These examples from practice are drafted in a way that permits them to be shared with others in a program. We will be asking participants to prepare and send in their cases several weeks before a program is to begin. These cases will be shared with faculty to help them make their final plans for a program that better addresses the issues facing those enrolled. We find this is particularly valuable when we are working with faculty from a variety of disciplines who may not have regular contact with the practitioners that a program will serve. The cases help them to achieve a program that is more likely to integrate practice and theory.

We are now looking for more ways to introduce writing into our programs for practitioners. Writing is usually important in degree programs, but it is often left out of continuing professional education for practitioners. We believe that the ability to write well is strongly related to the cultivation of higher order reasoning skills. Clarity in writing is strongly linked to increasing clarity of thought. Writing assignments can be modest, but they should give practitioners an opportunity to reflect, to organize ideas, and to express their thinking effectively.

Finally, we are now using formats and pricing structures that encourage several practitioners from a single organization to attend our programs. As often as possible, we encourage members of an organizational team to be drawn from different levels in the organization. We find that programs can often better influence change if there are several individuals in an organization that are supporting a similar change strategy. Also, the knowledge gained can be more enduring if there are others with whom to exchange ideas when a practitioner returns to the work place.

Along these same lines, we have found that programs offered in-house at an organization provide a variety of opportunities for linking program content with some very specific realities of practice. An extended relationship with an organization that leads to a series of programs gives all involved in program planning and teaching a chance to test educational strategies against the facts of professional life.

Conclusion

We, like many of the readers of this journal, have the advantages of working at a university with rich academic resources, with a dean who encourages innovation to achieve educational excellence, and with a strong group of regional center directors and program development specialists. We hope that we can continue to use these advantages well as we move forward with our own efforts to create new programs for practitioners. As we illustrated at the outset of this article, our continuing conversations with practitioners help us to define issues and shape educational responses. We hope that this article extends our conversation with individuals in other institutions who are planning and developing new continuing professional education programs. We welcome all ideas and suggestions.

Suggested Readings

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