△○ alverno educators' newsletter

Department produces developmental model

"What we're coming to specify more clearly for ourselves as a department and for other faculty is both the developmental nature of student growth in social interaction skill and the necessary integration of that skill with the work of the disciplines," said Mary Diez, member of the Social Interaction Competence Department. Diez and other department members have focused their work this year on tracing the development of interaction performance skills across the college experience. "It's not learning the skills better in isolation or performing them outside of any context that leads to effective interaction," she said, "but integrating the skills more fully into the work they're doing — the real life expression of the skills. That means that they have to be very flexible skills."

Developmental Model a Breakthrough

Producing a developmental model of social interaction ability represents a real breakthrough for both the department and the disciplines concerned with interaction, according to Bernardin Deutsch, coordinator. "We've focused from the beginning on effective interaction as our educational outcome," she said, "using two very general models built on mainstream research in task-oriented and interpersonal contexts."

But Deutsch noted that like most research in social psychology and interpersonal communication, the models used by the department were most appropriate for the examination of a single meeting or several meetings of a stable group. Students have used them to look at the stages in the process of a given interaction and to identify behaviors that affect outcomes. "What was missing was a sense of where we could expect growth toward more effective behavior."

Members of the Social Interaction Department include Mary Diez, Robert Birney, Katherine Couture, Zita Allen, Virginia Wagner, Ann Schlaefer, Jane Halonen, Bernardin Deutsch (coordinator), and Mary Lynn Primozich.

Dean's Notes:

Although student discussion is a popular classroom activity, it is rare that students receive systematic instruction, practice, and evaluation of their performance. It is rarer still that development of specialized communication skills necessary for productive discussion and group decision making is considered a legitimate goal in higher education. For 10 years Alverno faculty have collaborated on a curricular design for social interaction. We are eliciting responses to their evolving theory and practice through this newsletter.

Two basic assumptions underlie the issues discussed. First, that, in itself, ability to interact effectively is appropriate as an educational goal and, second, that a college can assist students to develop the intellectual, affective, and performance skills which constitute effective interaction.

The first assumption has received public support through a growing acknowledgement of our personal, civic and global interdependence. In addition, educators are aware of student need to evaluate information and to question sources not only in print and visual media but in complex discussion settings where one is an involved participant. For students with ability to think critically in a group, probe value questions and assist themselves and others in accomplishing shared goals, the potential for lifelong learning is enhanced.

Regarding the second assumption, the experience of our faculty indicates not only that these abilities can be developed but also that they contribute to human development in other ways, for example, willingness to take initiative and to assume a problem solving approach to difficult situations.

We would be pleased to hear from any of our off-campus readers who share our interest in these questions or in topics studied by faculty as described on the last page.

Austin Doherty

(continued from first page)

Presenting a preliminary model with individual and group contexts and discipline-related skills to the faculty at the January Faculty Institute, the department adapted a developmental schema to probe faculty experience with the interaction performance of beginning, developing, and advanced students. "We're seeing, for example, that beginning students tend to focus on their individual preparation for group work, but are often limited in their awareness of how the goals of others and group goals may relate to or conflict with their own goals. That awareness is more present in the student who begins to reflect on what factors affect group process, but the mark of the advanced student is the ability to draw out common goals to facilitate group cohesion and to make conflict functional," Diez said.

The role of conflict is a central focus in the model. Deutsch noted that beginning students in Level 1 assessment are unlikely to advocate or challenge unless they have personally identified in some way with an issue. "As students develop," she said, "they first learn to challenge others' points or positions in order to get more information out, and finally begin to appreciate the role of conflict in broadening the group's decision base."

Assessing Social Interaction

The assessment of student competence in social interaction at developmental levels is being strengthened by the department's work in identifying performance levels, Diez said. Students move from an initial base-line awareness of their performance at Level 1 to a demonstration of the ability to identify and analyze behavior using the task-oriented and interpersonal models at Level 2. At Level 3 they focus on their own development of effective skill and target areas to build on and to strengthen. At Level 4, they demonstrate the ability to plan, carry out and evaluate specific interactions, integrating their developing skill within realistic contexts.

Applications Across Disciplines

The developmental model of social interaction performance has applications across disciplines, although each discipline at the upper levels focuses inter-

After observing students in group interaction, assessors meet to reach consensus in their evaluation of each student's performance.

photo by Ulrike Welsch

action emphasis on the particular practice of that discipline or profession. "As instructors," Deutsch noted, "whenever we're aware of the next step, we're better able to prepare students for achieving it." From another perspective, Diez added, "Knowing the developmental picture gives you a sense of what you can ask next of students after they've achieved a certain skill."

Deutsch and Diez agreed that the ability of the Social Interaction Depart-

ment faculty to sit down and reflect on their individual and corporate experience was instrumental in completing the draft of the developmental model they will share with the faculty at the Summer Institute. "Our goal is to aid faculty to integrate the awareness of effective interaction across the curriculum, and to assist them in developing student potential in making these skills work," Deutsch said.

by Mary Diez

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Assessors enter new program

During the last ten years, more than 350 volunteers from the Milwaukee business and professional community have joined Alverno faculty in assessing the social interaction skills of new students. "This year," said Marilyn Thanos, Coordinator of External Assessment, "we have begun a developmental training program for these assessors, enhancing and strengthening the mutually beneficial relationship we have enjoyed."

The external assessment for social interaction (at Level 1) involves students in a simulated exercise. Assessors observe the group interaction, record

behaviors related to the criteria which the Social Interaction Department has specified, and meet to reach consensus in evaluating the students' demonstrated skills. Finally, an assessor meets with each student, giving her personal feedback on her performance.

This experience is the student's first formal assessment of her ability to interact within a group, and the presence of assessors from outside the college is an important component of the process. As Thanos explained, "For the student, the active involvement of these professionals connects the skills she is learning to the workplace.

She sees that these skills are valued beyond the campus setting."

According to Bernardin Deutsch, Coordinator of the Social Interaction Department, "The new training program will assist the assessor in performing this vital role." In Phase One, the assessor learns about the Alverno Learning Process, the focus of the assessment, and expected student behaviors. The volunteer experiences the assessment process by participating in an assessment, under the direction of experienced assessors. Throughout Phase One, the volunteer works with an experienced assessor.

After this initial preparation and some experience, the assessor enters Phase Two, which focuses on refining the basic assessing skills of recording behavior, coming to consensus, giving feedback, and writing evaluations. Faculty use role playing and videotapes to concretize the experience. In Phase Three the assessor chooses from among three workshops, focusing on the skill he or she wants to know more about. Finally, in Phase Four, the experienced assessor is invited to assist in training new assessors, and the developmental training program reaches full cycle.

photo by Ulrike Welsch

Gerhard Krohn, retired executive, Rexnord, Inc., offers feedback to Mary Ann Galacia on her assessment.

Deutsch said, "The new training program will enrich the assessment process and its effect, which is that the student goes away respecting herself as an interactor, knowing her strengths and what she should work on."

by Bernardin Deutsch

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Interactive skills refined in off-campus settings

"Students in upper level courses test their interactive skills in the professional settings," said Bernardin Deutsch, who coordinates the Social Interaction Department. "They refine their interpersonal skills in selective settings related to their major field of study."

Students in the clinical track of psychology, for example, combine an off-campus placement with their clinical practicum course. Explained Jane Halonen, coordinator of the department, "The student develops a sense of sophistication about her role as a student in a clinical setting. Both on-site mentors and college faculty monitor her progress, evaluating how she interacts as a preprofessional helper."

Zita Allen, Clinical Coordinator in the Nursing Department, described social interaction as "the cornerstone of professional nursing." Katherine Couture and Patricia deSilva, nursing faculty, agreed. "Along with professional nurses from the community, we observe our students as they are giving client care, and later discuss with them why they used the strategies they did," Couture explained. "We look at both verbal and non-verbal behavior," added deSilva, "looking to see if they choose appropriate strategies based on their clients' needs."

Similarly, Alverno faculty and teachers from community schools assist education majors in assessing their classroom performance. "We look at their behavior," said Bernadette Halbur, Coordinator of the Education Department, "and relate it to departmental criteria, such as how the student manages group behavior, and whether she is sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences."

Like education students, management students use logs to record and reflect on their interactive skills in off-campus settings. As Patricia Jensen, faculty mentor for Weekend College management students, put it, "In order to be effective in accomplishing the goals of their organization, managers have to be able to work well with a variety of personnel. They need to develop a range of interactive skills that assist them to give and receive information, provide directions, and be productive members of committees and task forces. Through the social interaction competence we build these skills into the curriculum."

by JoAnn Schmitz