

THE PERSONAL APPLICATION ASSIGNMENT (PAA): DISCUSSION

A variety of texts and articles over the past few years have argued for the use of an alternative approach to exploring behavior within organizations, one that emphasizes experiential learning. This approach "emphasizes an existential, emergent view for learning" (McMullen, 1979), where the role of the instructor is that of learning facilitator, responsible for designing experiences for students to base learning upon, rather than as teacher, responsible for lecturing on theory and concepts. Although gaining wide acceptance, this approach has nevertheless created problems in the assessment of students' performance. Significant learning in this model of teaching occurs not only from the development of concepts, but also from the experiences themselves. McMullen (as well as others) has proposed the use of a personal application assignment to help solve the problem of performance assessment. This assignment is based on the experiential learning model formulated by Kolb (1971).

Kolb's model argues that learning occurs through a process that might begin with a concrete experience, which leads to reflective observation about the experience. The next stage is abstract conceptualization, in which people apply models, paradigms, strategies, and metaphors to the results of the experience. Active experimentation concludes the cycle as the concepts are then put into practice, thus generating new concrete experience.

In one sense, persons able to learn using all modes of the model will be better able to take away learning from the variety of contexts in which they interact. We feel that the Personal Application Assignment is a useful tool for both evaluation of a student's work in courses taught using an experiential approach; and further, that the Personal Application Assignment can serve as a way to help students learn to learn. The PAA is both an evaluation and a teaching technique.

Our past history of teaching using this method has shown that the PAA, in order to be most useful, must include clear guidelines for the student. To that end we have undertaken to set forth the guidelines below to help students to understand the requirements for effective PAAs.

General Comments

First of all, we believe that a zero-based grading system is important. In this system, 20 points are given for the total PAA. Four points are awarded for each of the four elements in the learning style model, and four points are awarded for the integration and synthesis and general quality of the PAA. Students start with zero points and are given specific points for each area, depending on their having met the criteria listed in the following section.

Choosing a good topic is essential. Select an experience that relates to the assigned course topics. It should be an experience that you would like to understand better (e.g., there was something about it that you do not totally understand, that intrigues you, that made you realize that you lacked certain managerial skills, or that

was problematical or significant for you). When students are excited about learning more about the incident, their papers are lively and interesting. The topic must be meaty enough to take it through the entire learning cycle. The incident does not have to be work related; an incident in any setting (sports teams, school, family, club, church, etc.) that relates to the course topics is acceptable.

Elements of the PAA

1. Concrete Experience (CE)

In this part of the paper, participants briefly describe what happens in the experience. A simple description of the events that occurred is not sufficient. The feelings experienced by the student as well as his or her thoughts and perceptions during the experience are relevant to this discussion.

Another way of looking at CE would be that it possesses an objective and a subjective component. The objective part presents the facts of the experience, like a newspaper account, without an attempt to analyze the content. The subjective part is the "here-and-now" personal experience of the event. This experience is composed of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts.

Helpful hints: (1) It often helps participants to replay the experience in their mind. After reviewing the experience, students should write a report of what they saw, heard, felt, thought, heard and saw others doing. (2) Participants should avoid presenting the detailed mechanics of the experience unless these are critical to the remainder of the paper. This section of the paper should be no longer than 1–1.5 pages long. (3) Students should avoid reporting the feelings and thoughts experienced after the experience being described. This retrospection is more appropriate in the reflective observation section.

2. Reflective Observation (RO)

The participant should ask him/herself: What did I observe in the experience and what possible meanings could these observations have? The key task here is to gather as many observations as possible by observing the experience from different points of view. The main skill to work on is perspective taking, or what some people call "re-framing." Try to look at this experience and describe it from different perspectives. For example, how did other participants view the situation and what did it mean to them? What would a neutral ("objective") observer have seen and heard? Now that you are older do you see the situation differently? What perspective did your parents have, if any? Look beneath the surface and try to explain why the people involved behaved the way they did. Reflect on these observations to discover the personal meaning that the situation had for you.

Helpful hints: (1) Discuss the experience with others to gain their views and clarify your perceptions. (2) "Unhook" yourself from the experience and meditate about it in a relaxed atmosphere. Mull over your observations until their personal meaning comes clear to you. Try to figure out why people, and you in particular,

behaved as they did. What can you learn about yourself, looking back on the experience? If you write about a conflict or interaction, be sure to analyze both sides and put yourself in the shoes of the other people involved.

3. Abstract Conceptualization (AC)

By relating assigned readings and discussions to what you experienced, you are demonstrating your ability to understand conceptually abstract material through your experiences. This process will help you refine your model of people and organizations. Although some assigned readings and discussions will have varying degrees of relevance to your experience, it is important that you make several references and not limit your conceptualizing to just one source. Use at least two concepts or theories from the course readings. Provide the source for each reference. This is also the place to insert your own personally developed theories and/or models if they assist you in making sense of the experience.

By reviewing theoretical material, you should be able to identify several specific concepts or theories that relate to your experience. First, briefly define the concept or theory as you would for someone who was not familiar with it. Next, apply the concept thoroughly to your experience. The tie-in should include the specific details of how the theory relates to and provides insight into your experience. Does the experience support or refute the theory? Avoid merely providing a book report of what you have read—you should discuss in some detail how you see concepts and theories relating to your experiences.

Helpful hints: (1) It is sometimes useful to identify theoretical concepts first and then search out and elaborate on an experience that relates to these concepts. (2) A slightly more difficult approach is to reverse the above procedure and search out those concepts that apply to your "raw" experience.

4. Active Experimentation (AE)

This section of the paper should summarize the practical lessons you have learned and the action steps you will take to make you more effective in the future. How can you test out your concepts developed in the preceding phase? These ideas can be stated in the form of rules of thumb or action resolutions. (Future actions must be based on the experience reported in Concrete Experience.) You should elaborate in detail how you see your action ideas being carried out. Be specific and thorough. Don't just repeat tips from the workbook. Include at least one action resolution that is based on new knowledge that you have gained about yourself as a result of writing the paper. Depending on the complexity of your ideas, you should present at least four things that you learned and a well-thought-out description of how you will apply them in the future. If you were to relive your experience, what would you do differently? If you were the manager in the story, what would you do differently? Based on the insight you've gained about yourself and others, how would you handle a similar situation in the future? Label your action steps so the reader does not have to dig for them (e.g., "First,..." "Second,..." "Third,..." and "Finally,...").

Helpful hints: (1) Project a future experience in which you envision the implementation of your ideas and then elaborate on that experience as a way of demonstrating how your actions will be carried out. (2) Where does this model exist in your life (home, work, school)? Do you need a support system to make it happen? Someone to "contract" with? (3) Try to imagine the final results of your experimentation. What will it be like if you accomplish what you want to do?

5. Integration and Synthesis

The well-written PAA has a focal issue and a story line with themes that are carried throughout each of the four sections. The idea of synergy applies here: "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts." If integration is present, then the reader can attend to the content without distraction; if integration is absent, barriers prevent the reader from gaining a full appreciation of the content.

Other barriers that prevent the reader from fully appreciating the paper's content are spelling and grammatical errors. Because good writing skills are so important in the business world, there should be no errors in your paper. Use the spell and grammar check on your computer and have others read your paper before you hand it in.

Helpful hints: (1) See a writing and grammar guide like *The Everyday Writer*. (2) Keep in mind the following points:

- Decide on the plot for your paper and outline what information is needed in each section to carry that plot throughout the entire paper.
- Label each section: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, etc.
- Transitions are important (between sentences, paragraphs, and sections) and make the paper flow.
- The four sections should be equally well developed and fairly similar in length.

Personal Application Assignment Rubric

Please bear these grading criteria in mind as you are writing your paper and doing your final revision. Grades will be based on the percentages as listed in the applicable syllabi.

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE—4 Points

- _____ Does the paper contain a clear, objective description of facts in your personal experience? (2 points)
- _____ Does it contain a subjective description of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that occurred during (not after) the experience? (2 points)
- _____ Does this section provide enough information so the reader will understand the rest of the paper, but not too much irrelevant detail? For an individual PAA, section should not exceed 1–1.5 pages. (Delete 1 point)

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION—4 Points

- _____ Did you look at the experience from the different points of view of all the major actors? (2 points)
- _____ Did you make an attempt to figure out why the people involved, and you in particular, behaved as they did? (1 point)
- _____ Did the different perspectives and behavioral analyses add significant meaning to the situation? (1 point)

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION—4 Points

- _____ Did you briefly define and explain at least two different concepts or theories from the assigned readings that relate to your experience, and did you reference them properly? (2 points)
- _____ Did you thoroughly apply the concepts/theories to your experience? (2 points)

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION—4 Points

- _____ Did you summarize the practical lessons you derived from analyzing your experience? (1 point)
- _____ Did you describe thoroughly at least four action steps you will take in the future so you can be more effective? (2 points)
- _____ Did you identify and include at least one action step that is based on what you have learned about yourself as a result of this analysis? (1 point)

INTEGRATION AND WRITING—4 Points

- _____ Does the PAA have major themes that are woven though out each section of the paper? Are the sections well integrated and fairly equally developed? (1 point)
- _____ Is the paper clear and well written (few awkward phrases, etc.)? (1 point)
- _____ Is the paper free of spelling errors? (1 point)
- _____ Is the paper free of grammar errors? (1 point)

_____ **TOTAL**