EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ON THE WILD SIDE

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ABSTRACT

The University of Akron offers a senior-level progressive experiential course in which learners encounter stress as initial responders through managing the decisions and stress of wilderness adventure races in a tabletop exercise. The unique context of remote emergencies puts learners in an equal field of ignorance of competencies and stress management, allowing for increased stress levels to be developed and managed throughout the course. Unique to the course is the implementation of a wilderness first aid course for community partners, where students grow in facilitating professional development while meeting a community need. The three phases allow personal and team-based professional competencies to be practiced and tested through the experiential educational model.

INTRODUCTION

In emergency management, new employees must be able to perform their roles in stressful situations on their first day of service. On-the-job training (OJT) is a practice that assumes individuals can manage stress in critical decision-making. An alternative that allows individuals to experience and grow in managing stress happens before the first day of work within an experiential curriculum. Through participation in the University of Akron's *Emergency Management in Remote Settings* course, students mature in their management of stress while also using it to help others grow through three distinct phases: (a) developing their competence to manage an emergency, (b) developing others' competencies, and (c) applying competencies in a tabletop exercise.

Emergency management academic programs aim to develop professionals who can systematically approach, identify, and react in an efficient, effective, and productive manner in all phases of the discipline (mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery). To validate the learning process, experiential-based courses offer the opportunity to exercise knowledge and skills in a supportive environment, so both the student and instructor can understand their behaviors. This article describes a service-learning course that elicits individual and team-based competencies in *remote emergencies*. As defined in this course, remote emergencies are situations where no outside or advanced support is expected for more than an hour. During remote emergencies, practitioners must manage initial and secondary assaults, the health and safety of all people involved, and long-term plans for accessing help or self-recovery. After an introduction to the University of Akron, each phase is described to provide the context in theory and method for building universal competencies for managing emergencies.

University and Department Background

The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, is home to over 13,500 undergraduates and almost 1,800 graduate students within the Cuyahoga River Valley. This course, based out of the School of Disaster Science & Emergency Services, with approximately 160 students in the program, can range from 10-20 students. The Higher Learning Commission serves as the institutional accreditor, and the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) accredited the Emergency Management & Homeland Security (EMHS) program, which was the first in the nation. The university is located in the Midwest U.S. Census Region and FEMA Region V.

The EMHS program requires a 225-hour internship and uses project/problem-based learning across the curriculum. The university provides faculty and students support in experiential learning through the Center for Experiential Learning. The center strives to "enable students to emerge as civically engaged, skilled, and adaptable leaders, ready to take on real-world challenges" (University of Akron, n.d.). The EMHS program integrates service learning into coursework to meet community needs and allows students to demonstrate the program's learning outcomes in their professional roles.

Course Description

Emergency Management in Remote Settings is a senior-level current topics course in the EMHS program, open to all university students, with no prerequisite courses. The course has three phases designed to achieve the following learning outcomes:

1. Proficiently demonstrate key emergency action principles in different situations.
2. Clearly articulate a working definition of leadership in preparing for and responding to emergencies.
3. Proficiently facilitate learning with various audiences.
4. Critically analyze scholarly articles related to learning and epidemiology of injury and illness in your chosen context.
5. Critically and productively peer review all teaching (self, peer, and faculty).
6. Strategically incorporate learning strategies (e.g., distance learning, moulage) to create efficient and effective learning opportunities.

Phase I: Personal Competencies

The first phase is developing personal competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitude) for addressing remote emergencies. Remote emergencies occur when advanced care is more than an hour away, requiring long-term management of victims, bystanders, and the environment. Students prepare by learning about personal, group, and environmental safety; the need for leadership; and quality followership. They then know how to assess victims for life-threatening and non-life-threatening issues, learn first aid and second aid while managing evacuation situations, and victims and bystander safety. This phase culminates with an eight-hour field exercise with students demonstrating and learning through drills followed by more complicated and stressful scenarios.

Phase II: Competencies of Others

As future emergency managers, students must know how to prepare future teams or volunteers to respond to emergencies. Various community-based groups include scouting, local Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD), and wilderness guides, who all might be expected to care for themselves or others in remote emergencies. The second phase begins with reflecting on the first phase and developing field exercises for the community-based group going through a Wilderness First Aid course. This activity allows students to practice content development, facilitation, and reflection on accomplishing their objectives. Each student has individual and team responsibilities to update course content. For example, Stop the Bleed, a national program to empower lay responders to stop life-threatening bleeding has regular educational updates to incorporate. Then the students provide primary leadership of a field exercise (facilitation of scenarios, reflection, and logistics) for learners. Qualified wilderness first aid instructors supported students and verified participant competencies for certification.

Phase III: Applying Competencies

The third phase, building on the prior two experiences, has the class assuming the emergency management role of a wilderness adventure race in a tabletop exercise. Students take the roles of race executive staff, county emergency management, first responders, fire, law enforcement, Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) members, and race volunteers. Students have a week to prepare their roles and develop emergency operation plans for a specific race venue (a state park). Faculty built the tabletop, consisting of three parts, where hazards and problems are presented to the students over two hours. The exercise starts with an isolated emergency, then an environmental hazard development, and finishes with a multi-casualty issue complicated by weather and remote conditions.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning guided the development of the course in which university students and service-learning participants had the opportunity to build a plan, test it, receive feedback, and make new plans. Additionally, Stress Inoculation Theory (SIT) (Forman, 1987; Meichenbaum, 1985; Meichenbaum & Novaco, 1985) was used in the course design. SIT structures an evolving stress level, starting with learning about the potential stress, then experiencing simple forms of stress, and managing more complicated stress conditions. Combined with Kolb's approach, learners develop behaviors that allow them to perform more effectively and efficiently in stressful situations. For EMHS students, this starts with the development of remote emergency competencies, leveling up to them managing the development of emergency management competencies in others, and culminating in a novel emergency scenario that requires all elements of the first two phases.

Health and Safety

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, this course existed in multiple formats; during COVID-19, it was delivered in a hybrid format. Lectures were conducted online, and the physical elements

were conducted in face-to-face classrooms. This allowed smaller groups to come in person and practice the physical elements. During AY2020-21, we used mannequins in place of participants playing victim roles in complying with social distancing requirements. We also followed all university protocols about masking, monitoring, cleaning, and social distancing. We reported personal physical fitness before participation because of the physical nature of the course and its location in a remote setting. We considered all individual elements as "challenge by choice," so a person not comfortable with a particular skill could ask for an alternative. For example, someone with back issues did not have to lift a patient; they could instead manage the head.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

This course has different assessments throughout each phase. The personal learning phase has a written knowledge exam, videoed skill assessment, and behavioral assessment in the field exercise. The facilitation phase saw the logistical pre-work, lesson planning, and facilitation assessed together to demonstrate learning outcomes. All community participants must pass the knowledge and practical skill demonstration to receive American Red Cross certification or Ohio Emergency Medical Services (EMS) continuing education credit. In the tabletop exercise phase, the assessment was constructed from a rubric that includes appropriate content, logical application, and engagement. Students perform personal and group reflections on each phase for use in their professional portfolios.

PLANS

This course serves multiple purposes for the EMHS program and was structured to run annually. As a highly engaged course, it attracts people to learn about emergency management and to have something to look forward to in the curriculum. Student feedback has shown that they find the material challenging and valuable for the roles they will take on in their internship experiences. It allows faculty to see students applying what they have learned in the core EMHS courses, enabling faculty to advise and support students' professional development. The program is vested in the commitment to community engagement through service learning.

CONCLUSION

The challenges of remote emergencies are manifold. Still, the emergency management competencies and responses are the same but applied differently. Participants in this experientially-based course find it analogous to their job responsibilities in emergency management. This course prepares and challenges students to think systematically about emergency management in each phase, then in the field, and then as professionals. Each stage encourages growth from the other and allows individuals to self-assess and assess others as to capabilities needed to be safe and effective in achieving their objectives.

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