

What Can Challenges Bring?

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This is a summary report of “Five-Dollar-Challenge” conducted with the students in the department of International Career Development, Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University. “Five-Dollar-Challenge” was designed by Tina Seelig, the executive director of the Stanford Technology Ventures Program, to encourage Stanford University students to be adventurous and innovative.

I understand that there may be some disparity in math and language competence between Stanford University students and Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University students. However, as human beings, all of us have our own daily choices to make, tough problems to solve, and challenges to take. Life is in fact a process of making choices everyday: what clothes to wear, what to eat, what to do, so and forth. Facing these challenges, some people consciously choose conventional safe ways; some may be courageous to try new things. This attitude has little to do with intelligence, or age, even elementary school students can be very adventurous and creative.

With this project introduced in the course “Communication Strategy”, my attention is not on what creative products the students would come up with, rather, how they would react to the challenge. To be more specific, I would like to see how many students decide to take part in the team project, in what ways the teams are to be formed, how they negotiate with each other to reach their goals, and what kind of presentations they will make. Working on the project requires the students to utilize the knowledge and skills they have learned in class. As a reward, they will earn good credits based on their performance in this project. As it turned out, the students proved to be far more creative than I had expected.

I. "The Five-Hundred-Yen-Project" and "The Five-Clip Project"

1. Seelig's Five-Dollar Challenge

Tina Seelig’s assignment went like this. Each of fourteen teams of students received an envelope with five dollars of “seed funding” and was told they could spend as much time as they wanted planning. However, once they opened the envelope, they had only two hours to generate as much money as possible. The students had time from Wednesday afternoon until Sunday evening to complete

the assignment. Then, on Sunday evening, each team had to send her one slide describing what they had done, and on Monday afternoon each team had three minutes to present their project to the class. They were encouraged to be entrepreneurial by identifying opportunities, challenging assumptions, leveraging the limited resources they had, and by being creative. Instead of five dollars, I used 500 Japanese yen.

2. Seelig's Ten-Paper-Clip Challenge

Ten-Paper-Clip Challenge was a modified project by Tina Seelig inspired by Kayle MacDonald, who started with one red paper clip and traded up until he had a house in a year. Although the “Five-Dollar Challenge” turned out to be a great success, Tina Seelig had one concern that “I didn’t want to communicate the value is always measured in terms of financial rewards.” Therefore, instead of five dollars, she gave each team an envelope containing ten paper clips. The students were told to generate as much “value” as possible in a few days.

3. Class

Tina Seelig divided her class into several teams and had all the students participate in her projects. In my case, I leave the decision of whether to participate or not up to the students.

As mentioned above, the projects were conducted in two different classes under the same title “Communication Strategy”. This is an elective course open to the sophomores who had taken “The Introduction to Communication” when they were freshmen. 47 students out of 60 (19 students were studying abroad at that time) enrolled in this course, with 22 students on Wednesday and 25 students on Thursday. “Communication Strategy” deals with interpersonal conflict from different perspectives such as diversity, communication, emotional intelligence, trust, and so forth.

4. Participants

At the beginning of the course, I explained to the students that they would be given two types of assignments which would account for 60% of the final evaluation: one was to write a 2000 word report on the activities in the course; the other, if they wanted, they could choose to work on one project. For Wednesday class, it was the five-hundred-yen project, whereas for class on Thursday it was the five-clip project. Instead of explaining all the details and giving examples on what they could do, I only gave them very brief introductions. Since they were requested to write a report every week in their first year course “Introduction to

Communication”, a 2000 word report shouldn’t be a problem for them. In contrast, the team project was something new that they had never tried. The students who wanted to play safe may choose to write the 2000 word report. For those who wanted to try something new and more challenging, they could choose the project. The students were given one week to consider and decide which assignment they wanted to choose.

A week later, eleven students out of twenty-two in the Wednesday class chose “the five-hundred-yen project”. There were three groups with the number of four, five and two students. As for the Thursday class, eight students out of twenty-six decided to try “the five-clip project”. There were two groups with six and two students.

II. Results

1. The Five-Hundred-Yen Challenge (Wednesday Class)

The groups in this class had received 500 yen as their resources. There were four, five, and two members in Group 1, 2, 3.

A. Group 1

There were four members in Group 1. This group decided that they would sell homemade bakery such as cakes and cookies. It didn’t take them much time to come to consensus because the three of them were quite confident in baking. Three made the bakery and one did other chores. They sold their bakery to their friends and classmates in the same department with reasonable prices. They baked apple pies, Madeleine, and banana muffins. They sold 10 apple pies for 50 yen each (500 yen), 15 Madeleine for 50 yen each (750 yen), 15 banana muffins for 100 yen each (1,500 yen). In total they got 2,750 yen. They had paid 750 yen for ingredients. Therefore they earned 2,000 yen. They showed the pictures of their classmates who had bought their bakery items, and the classmates looked really happy. With this team project, not only did the participants earn profit, they also made their classmates happy.

B. Group 2

There were five members in Group 2. As a team, they discussed several possibilities of service and goods to sell. They started their discussion with brainstorming, and examined what would make their friends and classmates happy. Since they knew that many students in the department wanted to become flight attendants in the future, this group picked up the idea of making photo frames using airplane photos.

First of all, they got several airplane photos taken by some friends for free,

and with the 500 yen they bought necessary materials such as photo frames and seashells. Due to the lack of time and money, they managed to make only two photo frames. Before they planned to launch advertisement on the Internet, the photo frames were sold out. Their friends in the same department happily bought them at the price of 300 yen each. In their presentation, they also showed the pictures of their customers who looked happy with those picture frames. By the deadline of the project, they sold two frames with 100 yen profit. Although this amount sounded small, but since they still had the materials for the frames left, if they had more time, they could make a few more.

C. Group 3

There were only two members in Group 3. Instead of gaining profit, they decided to make someone happy. With 500 yen, they bought some ingredients and made a heart-shaped chocolate bar with a cute angel and the name in pink sugar.

It was exciting to see the students present what they had accomplished in the project. What they achieved was far beyond expectation. When the two students in Group 3 came toward me with a nicely wrapped box, I didn't know what was going on. When I opened the box, and saw my name on the heart-shaped chocolate, I was speechless. They impressed me by making me and all of us happy.

2. The Paper-clip Challenge (Thursday Class)

In this class, two groups volunteered for the project. There were six students in Group 1, and two students in Group 2.

A. Group 1

There were six students in Group 1. At first they couldn't decide what to do to add value to the five clips each of them had, therefore, they decided to keep exchanging their five clips with others four times individually first, and see what they would get in the end. Then in the second round, each three of them put all the items they had together to exchange for something more valuable. Finally the whole members trade the two items with one member's mother, and they had a brand new blue glass.

Along the way, there were all different kinds of things being exchanged, some second-handed, some new. Each time when they got something different, their way of viewing value changed a little. In the entire process, their perspectives of value kept changing as they continuously negotiating themselves with others. What they learned through this project was that "value" is viewed differently by individuals, how much value a person attaches to something is determined by that person, not others. In other words, the students now can see that people don't always share the same perspective with others. It is important to understand that

people's perspectives differ and therefore trying to show empathy is a good start to build good relationship with others.

B. Group 2

Group 2 didn't show up in class. Whatever reasons there might be for their absence, they must have not been ready for the presentation.

III. Follow-up Survey

A follow-up survey was conducted to get the students' feedback. With regard to the participants' reasons of why they chose to work on the project, eight reported that they found this project more interesting than summarizing what they had learned in the class, and they thought it was a good experience. Seven said that they thought they could learn something new by taking this opportunity to challenge themselves. Two explained that they were invited to join the project by their friends. One student reported that she wanted to cooperate with others, another confessed she had no confidence in writing a long report; one student said that she thought she could get a better score from the project than the written report.

In contrast, with respect to the reasons against working on the project, ten students expressed their lack of confidence although they had some degree of interest. Two felt that they didn't have enough time to work on the project and prepare for a team presentation; another two said their schedule didn't fit; two students said they didn't choose the projects because they were not sure about the objectives; a few others either preferred to work on their own or showed no interest in the project.

IV. Follow-up Projects

After the students saw all the presentations, forty students said they would like to try if there was another opportunity. Actually there was another opportunity. In the middle of December, the Department of ICD would have a Christmas Talent Show together with the freshmen. Therefore, I encouraged them to start their own project. Five students decided to have a try.

A. Christmas Cards

Two students made forty Christmas cards at the total cost of 540 yen, sold out all to ICD students and gained a profit of 660 yen. They also organized some students to write greetings on the cards and sent them to their advisory teachers. By doing this, they became grateful to the support from their peers. They also

reported that it was a great opportunity to find out how the meaning of “value” changed due to different perspectives.

B. Questionnaire

The other three students had a survey on investigating value systems. First, they showed a picture of a necklace and a pair of earphones to their friends, and asked them to write the price they thought these two items would cost. Second, they asked how much money their friends would be happy to pay for the end-of-year party (bounenkai) with the following three relationships: classmates from the same university, co-workers from their part-time work place, and close friends. Third, the values of sentences “I like you” and “I love you” were tested. After summarizing the results, the three members had come to a similar conclusion that people’s value systems, their ways of attaching meanings to things, and their interpretation of words are all different.

V. Summary

What the participants got at the end of the projects such as profits of 2,000 yen, 100 yen, happy smiles, and a new glass is not important, although a large number of the students were deeply impressed by the results. What’s important is that with the limited resources and time, they actually brainstormed, thought and discussed, took actions, made necessary adjustments, and finished the task on time. Compared to the result, this process of communication with others and working as a team is more meaningful. The biggest difference between writing a 2000 word report and challenging the project is the teamwork.

“The Five-Hundred-Yen-Project” and “The Five-Clip Project” allowed the students to practice their communication skills learned inside classroom. It also gave the students chances to step out of their comfort zone, negotiate and cooperate with others, practice problem solving and manage to keep balance in their life.

I was pleased to see some students who didn’t try the project at first decided to challenge during Christmas Talent Show. A drop of stone in the water creates lots of ripples. I am sure that the next time the students are given similar projects or tasks, more students will take the opportunity and challenge without hesitation. I also believe that by creating opportunities like this, the students will continue to explore and have more exciting discoveries in their journey of life.

References

Seelig, T. (2009). *What I wish I knew when I was 20: A crash course on making your place in the world*. HarperCollins, NY.

