

INNOVATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR A LARGE ONLINE BUSINESS DEGREE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to begin to answer the question of how and why experiential learning methodologies might be modified in order to be introduced effectively into an online human resources management degree program. Traditionally, experiential learning is a philosophy of learning by doing and includes internships, apprenticeships; field work, clinical application, cooperative education, fellowships, practicums, service learning, student teaching, study abroad, and volunteer experiences. However, it is exceptionally difficult to deliver instructionally sound real-life experiential learning experiences. Further research is needed to identify the experiential learning methodologies which would be most practical for a large online university business degree program.

THESIS

In Business education, experiential learning methods have been defined as inclusive of classroom “exercises, service learning, cultural immersion/study abroad, business planning/new venture creation, and internship/live case.”(ABSEL, 2013). These methods are not new, but their application has gained momentum in recent years, in part for their value in enhancing students’ ethical aptitudes, sense of social responsibility, and need for understanding of stakeholder perspectives, as well as development of ‘deep smarts’ (See Frederick, 2006; Kolb, 1975; Osland, Turner, Kolb & Rubin, 2007; Reed, 2010; Steiner & Watson, 2006). Business education experiential learning may be “applied in the classroom, community as laboratory or workplace as learning community” (ABSEL, 2013). However, educational environments are rapidly

changing, and therefore, so must experiential learning.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), by as early as 2007-2008 academic year, 20% of all U.S. undergraduates, approximately 4.3 million students, took at least one course online. Carron (2006) asserts that adult learners are more likely than their traditional undergraduate counterparts to engage in online education. Indeed, to do well in an online course, one must have a high level of maturity, personal accountability, and intrinsic motivation. Unlike more traditional college students, online learners often are employed, they are heads of families, and they are often involved as stakeholders in organizations in their communities. However, online learners are also often adults, possibly in career transition, re-entry from the military or other public service, and their need for network development may be greater than the traditional student for whom “college means newfound freedom because they can live on campus or with friends away from parents” (Carron, 2006, p. 1). Clearly, there are many benefits to experiential learning in colleges of business, but just as clearly, it may not be feasible to implement many of those methodologies at the scale of a large online degree program. Thus, in this paper we explore best practices in experiential learning, such as case studies and group activities that enhance student learning, that may be most appropriate for a large scale online degree program.

BACKGROUND

Experiential learning is most simply defined as learning by doing, as opposed to learning by listening or learning by seeing. Experiential learning is also known as “learning through action ... by doing ... through experience [or] ... through discovery and

exploration” (“Experiential,” n.d.). Experiential learning involves personal experience outside the classroom that provides valuable learning opportunities to students (“Definitions,” 2013). Gentry (1990) suggested that experience will lead to learning as long as care is taken to make sure that conditions are right. Experiential learning in educational programs can be useful to engage learners in the program and to instill in them a life-long motivation to learn (Sibthorp, Schumann, Gookin, Baynes, Paisley, & Rathunde, 2011). In addition, the literature is replete with examples of how experiential learning can be linked to understanding others and sustaining social capital (see Putnam, 2000), and more recently, overcoming mental blocks and revising outdated mental models (Robinson, Mitchell & Hoover, 2013), and forming unlikely partnerships for purposes of complex problem solving (Nadkarni, 2000; Reed, 2010).

During recent reviews of online undergraduate and graduate degree programs, a team of faculty explored ways of engaging students through experiential learning methodologies especially as related to human resource management curriculum. Notably, the faculty had goals of: 1) enhanced student learning outcomes, 2) continuous course/program improvement, and 3) preparing learners for success beyond the classroom. The faculty team realized that most traditional forms of student engagement in experiential learning (e.g., service-learning, using community as learning laboratory, apprenticeships, and other face-to-face interactions) would not be feasible due to the scope and scale of the online program, as well as the diverse lifestyles, employment situations, geographic locations and other responsibilities of the primarily adult online learner population.

THE CHALLENGE

The academic literature is replete with reasons for engaging students, and especially Business students, in experiential learning. Among the most important of reasons is for students to experience learning as persons, what Robinson, Mitchell & Hoover (2013, p. 388) describe as “a process of ‘do-look-learn’” rather than “learn-look-do” is to be able to see themselves differently as a result of learning. In addition, civic engagement has always been a goal of experiential learning, especially as in the learning as service context in the tradition of John Dewey (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Putnam, 2000; Corporation for National & Community Service, 2013). As adult learners return en masse to earn the credentials and succeed in their careers, provide for their families and benefit organizations, communities and society at large, they often select online degree programs that provide the quality of learning experience essential for their success in the afore mentioned areas without the encumbrance of the structure of an on-ground classroom that inhibits availability of the programs they need in the timeframe and location when

they need them. For online faculty and university decision makers, the challenge is how to provide online learners with the best education possible without sacrificing learner engagement – with classmates, instructor, the institution, and all stakeholders in their education. This includes organizations and the community at large. It also includes taking learners, at a distance, from “the norm of self-interest” (Miller, 1999) to self-interest properly understood (DeTocqueville, 1835/2007) in the context of learning as engagement with society.

The Bachelor of Arts in Human Resource Management (BAHRM) is among 19 Business degree programs offered by our University and accredited by the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education. The BAHRM is offered through the College of Business & Professional Studies and is one of 28 bachelor degrees that can be earned in the College of Business & Professional Studies. Even more specifically, the BAHRM is one of 19 areas of interest in which online bachelor degrees are offered through our University’s College of Business & Professional Studies. The BAHRM is offered at both the traditional campus and the online campus. In the 2011-2012 academic year there were 2,667 online students enrolled in the BAHRM degree program.

Our University’s BAHRM degree program was designed for students seeking to acquire a concentration of human resource knowledge within a broad base of business concepts. Students are provided with the opportunity to explore and acquire insights into the relationship between an organization’s ability to implement its strategic intent through the HR organization’s functional areas such as recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and benefits. All BAHRM students must complete a capstone requirement, Strategic Human Resources Management, which integrates content across the degree program and validates the students’ knowledge.

The challenge is to find appropriate methods to bring experiential learning opportunities to the BAHRM program in the most cost effective and academically acceptable manner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential learning consists of opportunities including internship, apprenticeship; field work, clinical application, cooperative education, fellowship, practicum, service learning, student teaching, study abroad, and volunteer experiences, to name a few activities (“Experiential,” n.d.). It has been widely recognized as a way to deepen students’ learning experience, to provide a means of interaction and engagement with real world scenarios, and to assist learners who need to develop a network of stakeholders in their education.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

One of the fundamental principles of adult learning theory, or andragogy, is that orientation to learning for adults is different than learning orientation is for children. Andragogy suggests that adults learn best when the learning experience will help them “perform tasks or deal with problems” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 67) that they find in the real world. Learning is most effective when the new knowledge or behaviors are learned in the context of a practical application in real-life situations (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005).

Concept Development and Evolving University Acceptance

The concept of experiential learning was described by Gentry (1990) and further expanded by Kolb and Kolb (2005). Lidon, Rebollar, and Moller (2011) suggested that universities consider establishing collaborative environments to promote experiential learning. Bevan and Kipka (2012) found that experiential learning can help learners prepare for business challenges. Finally, Duarte (2013) found that university attitudes have evolved into promoting experiential learning as a best teaching practice. Greene

Experiential learning is learning through experience which involves learning by doing, learning from a real world situation, interactive learning, personal involvement of the learner, or participation in a learning situation that requires significant active involvement. Experiential learning methodologies must be designed to connect learning objectives to suitable activities and then conducted so as to allow for changes to maintain a favorable learning environment. Experiential learning must provide opportunities for evaluation by both faculty and learners, and result in feedback from both to ensure that the positive aspects of such methodologies are supported (Gentry, 1990).

Experiential learning can be described as a philosophy of learning through structured experiences more than a learning process. Gentry (1990) identified nine characteristics of experiential learning. Experiential learning should be applied, participative, interactive, emphasize the whole person, be in contact with the business environment, allow for variability and uncertainty, consist of structured exercises, solicit learner evaluations, and provide feedback on both the process and the outcomes. Kolb and Kolb (2005) suggest that experiential learning consists of six characteristics: learning is a process; learning consists of relearning; learning requires the resolution of conflicts; learning is adapted to the world; learning relies on transactions between the learner and the environment; and learning creates knowledge. Effective experiential learning transforms experience into knowledge.

Experiential learning allows learners to learn from one another in a semi-structured environment. Experiential learning focuses on the process of learning, which includes

doing, reflecting, and applying what was learned. While content of experiential learning is important, it is more important that learners engage with the content, the instruction, and their peers, then reflect on how that content was learned (“Experiential learning,” n.d.).

While the current practice of management education includes case studies, role playing, or group projects, such education needs to include more opportunities for professional practice. Universities should consider collaborations between learners, teachers, researchers and practitioners. Such collaboration should ensure experiential learning opportunities for both the learners and the practitioners involved. Real projects should form the core of the experiential learning opportunities. This collaborative environment should be designed to include opportunities to further knowledge through research (Lidon, Rebollar, & Moller, 2011).

Experiential learning can be useful in a wide variety of management and business administration applications in addition to applications in academia. Successful learning can lead to necessary adaptations and successful change for both individuals and organizations. Experiential learning can: help prepare for business challenges; establish links between simulations and improved management skills; improve working relationships; create sustainable performance; combine social engagement with management development; use technology to develop independent thinking; sustain ethical performance; assist in developing positive attitudes toward sustainability; and enhance learning at the organizational level (Bevan & Kipka, 2012)

Duarte (2013) performed an analysis of the evolving attitudes toward the ability of experiential learning methodologies to support best practices in university teaching. Prior to the 1980s the focus was on improving skills for teachers. Since then, the debate has come to focus on improving the classroom and course content experience for learners. Among those best practices are participative activities designed to improve skills in critical thinking and problem solving through practical application.

Learner Readiness and Acceptance

Most classroom activities do not include experiential learning methodologies (Munoz & Huser, 2008) and those that do are not as valuable as experiences from outside the classroom (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). As the economy changes rapidly, so to must classroom activities (Webb, De Lange, & O’Connell, 2009). Greene (2011) and Rosario, Flemister, Gampert, & Grindley (2013) suggest that learners are not yet prepared to take advantage of experiential learning methodologies. However studies such as one by Sibthorp, Schumann, Gookin, Baynes, Paisley, and Rathunde (2011) suggest that when given an opportunity in the classroom, learners become very enthusiastic about experiential learning.

Traditional classroom activities do not allow learners to reflect, analyze, synthesize, or apply the lecture content they are instead kept busy recording. In general, learners

lack the skills necessary to analyze data and use the results to prepare realistic marketing forecasts, plans, or programs. Experiential learning has the potential to change learner focus from recording information to actively participating in the learning process. Experiential learning opportunities provide direct experiences that can be used to connect academic content to the professional world, increase learner involvement, and to increase learner appreciation of a particular subject (Munoz & Huser, 2008).

While case studies are considered a valuable tool for learning and are widely used in business education, they are not an effective substitute for experiential learning. Experiences outside the classroom are more valuable and effective at helping learners to turn theory into practice, but most university learners do not participate in experiential learning opportunities (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). The rapidly changing economy requires learners to attempt to acquire a skill set with requirements that are also continually changing. Whereas in the past learners needed to be able to use and manipulate a specific set of technical skills, current learners are required to learn and apply the softer skills of critical thinking and problem solving. Current learners need a broader understanding of how the real world works and they must be able to communicate that understanding more effectively (Webb, De Lange, & O’Connell, 2009).

Current college freshmen have weaker study skills and are less prepared than freshmen were 40 years ago. Unless the learning experience helps to improve skills it is unlikely that poorly prepared freshmen will continue on to complete

their degree program. Active participation is a necessary part of experiential learning which can lead to active learning and increased learner satisfaction (Greene, 2011). Incoming college freshmen are often unprepared for learning at the college level. Many do not pass entrance placement tests and eventually drop out of their academic programs (Rosario, Flemister, Gampert, & Grindley, 2013). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) suggest that differences in the quality and amount of previous experience greatly influence an adult’s ability to learn from active learning opportunities.

Learners who come to enjoy their learning experience may become lifelong learners, and learn to motivate themselves to learn more in support of their careers and for personal improvement. Appropriate experiential learning opportunities may support initial learner motivation and continue to reinforce positive attitudes toward learning. Sibthorp, Schumann, Gookin, Baynes, Paisley, and Rathunde (2011) conducted a qualitative study of the correlation of learner engagement during a leadership course that used learning opportunities based in participative outdoor activities. Their results, though limited in scope, indicated that experiential learning opportunities were likely to increase learner engagement and learning motivation.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING METHODOLOGIES

Northern Illinois University (“Experiential learning,” n.d.) identified several experiential learning methodologies

EXHIBIT 1 A COMPARISON OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS TO METHODOLOGIES ADOPTED

Experiential Learning Characteristics		Experiential Learning Methodologies
Gentry (1990)	Kolb & Kolb (2005)	
applied	knowledge creation	situation analysis; Munoz & Huser (2008)
participative	transactions	small team projects; Green (2011)
interactive		interactive software; Murphrey (2010)
whole person	resolve conflict	peer assistance and permanent teams; Duarte (2013) international study tour; Webb, De Lange, & O’Connell (2009)
business related	adapted to world	project incubator; Libon, Rebollar, & Moller (2011) job shadowing; McCarthy & McCarthy (2006) field practicum and internship; Walden University (2012)
variability		None identified
structured exercises		digital simulations; Beckem & Watkins (2012)
learner evaluated	relearning	None identified
provide feedback	process	None identified

including: apprenticeships, clinical, cooperative learning and internships (see also Gentry, 1990; Rosario, Flemister, Gampert, & Grindley, 2013), fellowships, field work, practicums, service learning (see also Clarke, 2005), student teaching, international study tours (see also Webb, De Lange, & O'Connell, 2009), and volunteer opportunities. Other experiential learning methodologies include project incubators (Lidon, Rebollar, & Moller, 2011), digital simulations (Beckem & Watkins, 2012), student peer assistance and permanent teams (Duarte, 2013), interactive software (Murphrey, 2010), situation analysis (Munoz & Huser, 2008), small team projects (Greene, 2011), job shadowing (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006), computer-aided instruction, and live case studies (Gentry, 1990). Exhibit 1 provides a comparison of various experiential learning methodologies in practice, which are further discussed in the following paragraphs, to the experiential learning characteristics enumerated by Gentry (1990) and Kolb and Kolb (2005).

Clarke (2005) equates service learning with experiential learning, indicating that opportunities for community service as part of an educational program may lead to lifelong learning through involvement in the community. College courses that include community service benefit the community, the university, and the learner in various ways. Communities gain access to institutional resources, universities are seen as good corporate citizens and learners benefit through personal growth and experience in a real world environment. Clarke (2005) reported on one study of marketing faculty involved in service learning that suggested that while faculty engage in service learning willingly they did not see a career benefit in those activities.

McCarthy and McCarthy (2006) suggest that job shadowing may be an effective way to include experiential learning into a business curriculum. Job shadowing assignments were in the learners' chosen field, were closely supervised, and required learners to complete a reflective report and present their findings to the class. Following the job shadowing experience, a survey of learners indicated that job shadowing was much preferred over learning by case analysis.

Munoz and Huser (2008) conducted a semester long situation analysis project in an introductory marketing class using teams of learners. The majority of the learner participants agreed that the situational analysis exercise improved their understanding of how to conduct an analysis and that their project completion skills were improved. The majority also agreed that situational analysis exercises should be a permanent part of the marketing curriculum.

Webb, De Lange, and O'Connell (2009) suggest the use of an international study tour as one method of experiential learning. Their program allows teams of learners to visit "up to five countries and 12 [business] institutions over ... 20 days" during a summer break. The timing of the program allows learners to remain on travel

longer to better amortize cost and enhance cultural learning experiences. Learners interact with executives at the host institutions, gain experience with group dynamics through shared experiences, and develop communications and presentation skills as representatives of the university. Surveys administered to learners at the end of their participation indicated that the experience enhanced their appreciation of the discipline's impact on society, increase self-confidence, increased awareness of global issues, provided exposure to real world issues, increased employability, and help learners with other studies.

To investigate the potential of technology focused on learners to create experiential learning opportunities, Murphrey (2010) initiated a case study of how three interactive software applications – Camtasia, Centra, and SnagIt – could provide experiential learning opportunities to online undergraduate learners. This study followed the activities of 27 learners enrolled in an online instructional design course. While Murphrey (2010) reported that the results of this small study would be difficult to apply to all online learners, the results did indicate strong support for using interactive software to create experiential learning opportunities, as long as learners were trained in its use prior to, or as part of, the class.

Greene (2011) reported on the use of a small team marketing project in an introductory marketing class. In the class, learner teams were to create a marketing plan to sell cookies, purchase necessary materials, and then produce and sell the cookies. The results were of various levels of success, for the most part related to skills that learners brought to the experience. Those learners who were better prepared to work in teams, to lead or to follow well, were more successful than their less prepared classmates.

Libon, Rebollar, & Moller (2011) reported on an experience at a Spanish university with a project incubator model, wherein small learner teams worked on real projects at various small- and medium-sized businesses, small government organizations, and other local organizations. This limited experiment provided satisfactory results for both learner theoretical, practical, methodological, and learning process knowledge along with providing additional research opportunities in project management.

Beckem and Watkins (2012) suggest that one approach is to use digital media simulations. Available tools for digital media simulations are asynchronous, and use realistic, though simulated, settings to apply knowledge learned through other educational methods. Digital simulations are self-paced and can even include mentors who can provide feedback and additional information while the simulation is operating. Beckem and Watkins (2012) used a digital simulation to help prepare learners to make a presentation of their findings from an audit on diversity within a company. The 98 learners involved in the pilot study indicated that the digital simulation improved their knowledge of the subject and made learning more enjoyable.

Duarte (2013) interviewed five faculty involved in

business education, resulting in a series of case studies. The participants in this study recommended experiential learning as one way to motivate learners to learn, engaging them actively in their own learning, along with regular innovations in teaching skills and approach.

Hostos Community College (Rosario, Flemister, Gampert, & Grindley, 2013) initiated a summer program that provided groups of learners with workshops intended to develop personal learning skills and to introduce learners to the various support organizations at the college. The success of these workshops encouraged Hostos Community College to include career-based experiential learning in the first-year curriculum. One approach was to use cooperative education and internships which required collaborative partnerships between faculty, staff, and local business organizations. Success was ensured, in part, by preparing learners for the opportunity, making sure that local businesses were involved in selection and monitoring, and that faculty were supportive of the approach. The cooperative education and internship program is organized through the Hostos career services office and is monitored through an online tracking system. The data collected are shared with staff, faculty, and employers to ensure the viability of the program.

EXPERIENTIAL SIMULATIONS IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Hall (2013) asserts that when considering a simulation, it is important to define what learning is needed, as well as the constraints associated with the learning need. In this situation, the learning needed includes Human Resources management, but exceeds text book knowledge to changing mental models to consideration of the practice of Human Resource management in an organization populated by people serving customers. According to Beckem & Watkins (2012), two cohorts of undergraduate business

students used a Digital Media Simulation tool at the State University of New York. Initial results indicated that the simulation increased student engagement and learning.

Although still in preliminary research stages, Platine (2013) described use of a case study to deepen and enrich undergraduate learning in a statistical methods course in an online setting. He explained that latent effects of encouraging learners to examine one data set from multiple research perspectives, and mining it to consider various research questions, resulted in students' enhanced critical thinking and course engagement, as well as understanding of processes inherent in analyzing data.

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Miller (2013) posits that games and simulations can infuse fun into a classroom, thereby engaging students in creative problem solving and decision making in teams and as members of a community where failure has low stakes, success stakes are high, and there are opportunities for relevant feedback through practice. Kelly (2013) asserts that games, simulations and non-linear approaches to active learning afford online learners with opportunities to “meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject”(Meyers & Jones, as cited by Kelly, 2013, para. 1). Rahn (2013) provides a superb example of a simulation that could easily be adapted to teach students to problem solve, analyze information and consider cause and affect relationships in the context of a human resources classroom. Duarte (2013) suggests that good teaching practices should include experiential learning as a way to provide active learning and engage students.

EXHIBIT 2 EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING METHODOLOGIES EMPLOYED AT COMPARABLE UNIVERSITIES

University	Course	Experiential Methodology Used
Capella University	BUS3020	Hands-on technology application
	BUS3050, BUS4016	Case Studies
	BUS4993	Capstone Project
Trident University	BUS401, MGT301	Case Studies
	BUS499	Capstone Project
University of Phoenix	BUS475	Capstone Project
Walden University	Degree program related	Field experience and internship

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT COMPARABLE UNIVERSITIES

Four universities were selected for review as representative of having comparable human resource management programs and learner constituencies: Capella University, Trident University, University of Phoenix, and Walden. The topic of experiential learning is not explicitly discussed in the Capella University or Trident University International catalogs. Both the University of Phoenix and Walden University use the term experiential learning as something to be considered during a learning assessment which may grant academic credit for prior experiences. Of this limited comparison, only Walden University equates experiential learning with learning methodologies. Exhibit 2 provides a brief overview of the experiential methodologies in use at comparable universities.

Capella University offers a few courses in the human resource specialization which include hands-on application of technology (BUS3020 Fundamentals of E-Business) or case studies (e.g., BUS3050 Fundamentals of Organizational Communication, BUS4016 Global Business Relationships) along with a required capstone project (BUS4993) for all learners (Capella University, 2011). Trident University International program learning outcomes suggest that graduates should be able to apply the skills acquired in the program to analyze and assess business data in order to make decisions and provide solutions to business problems. Some courses include the use of case studies and learner projects (e.g., BUS 401 International Business, MGT 301 Principles of Management) along with integrative capstone projects (e.g., BUS 499 BSBA Integrative Project) for all learners (Trident University International, n.d.).

The University of Phoenix catalog (University of Phoenix, 2013) does not appear to include experiential learning opportunities in its human resource management specialization outside of a final capstone project (i.e., BUS 475 Integrated Business Topics). Walden University provides experiential learning opportunities through practical field experiences and internships in its Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling and the Mental Health degree programs. Learners must complete supervised field experience practicums prior to being considered for internships. Learners complete practicums and internships at the same site and work under the supervision of a licensed professional (Walden University, 2012).

When the research team compared their online Human Resource Management program with other comparable institutions, they learned that two institutions had implemented practicum, internship or capstone, or service-learning/citizenship course options as part of their degree requirements. The researchers found that of the two institutions that offered such experiential learning opportunities neither had large student populations that were located at great distances from their campuses (Reed, Nation & Swank, 2013).

SUMMARY

Adults learn best when the learning experience is presented in a real world context (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Experiential learning is a philosophy of learning that incorporates learning by doing as characterized by: learning as a process; learning consists of relearning; learning requires the resolution of conflicts; learning as adapted to the world; learning reliance on transactions between the learner and the environment; and learning creation of knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Experiential learning should be applied, participative, interactive, emphasize the whole person, be in contact with the business environment, allow for variability and uncertainty, consist of structured exercises, solicit learner evaluations, and provide feedback on both the process and the outcomes (Gentry, 1990). Experiential learning methodologies include project incubators (Lidon, Rebollar, & Moller, 2011), digital simulations (Beckem & Watkins, 2012), student peer assistance and permanent teams (Duarte, 2013), interactive software (Murphrey, 2010), situation analysis (Munoz & Huser, 2008), small team projects (Greene, 2011), job shadowing (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006), computer-aided instruction, and live case studies (Gentry, 1990). Experiential learning opportunities provide direct experiences that can be used to connect academic content to the professional world, increase learner involvement, and to increase learner appreciation of a particular subject (Munoz & Huser, 2008). Only one of four comparable universities reviewed specifically provides experiential learning opportunities through field experience practicums and internships, although not through their human resources degree programs (Walden University, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is exceptionally difficult to deliver instructionally sound real-life experiential learning experiences, especially when students have chosen a venue, such as online education, to ensure they can fit the priority of higher learning into their already busy, often over-scheduled, adult lives. Quality experiential learning opportunities can take a long time to develop and implement, are more difficult to assess, are difficult to properly size to the learner and the opportunity, and can be very expensive. The larger the institution or learner body, the more complex and difficult the task becomes. In many educational institutions, experiential learning simulations may be more practical to implement (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). While experiential learning benefits in a traditional learning environment may be well documented, the effort to create experiential learning opportunities in the virtual classroom has been limited. The emphasis has been on instructor use of technology in the virtual classroom instead of technology

available for learner use (Murphrey, 2010).

Experiential learning opportunities face several challenges related both to program maturity and participant attitudes. Learners may be reluctant to spend the extra time needed in classes with experiential learning opportunities than in those without such opportunities. Faculty who have never taught using experiential learning methodologies may not see the need or the benefit. Administrators may be concerned that the potential for adding such courses may be limited by available funding. It can be especially difficult to obtain external funding sources (Cowitz, 2010).

Learner interest in experiential learning might be gained through testimonials from peers, using panel discussions, videos, or campus events. Faculty interest might be gained through introduction to the existing literature, support groups, or mentoring by experienced faculty. Having the support of these two constituencies is critical to developing administrative acceptance and support. It is easier to develop an argument in favor of experiential learning if the demand from learners and faculty can be demonstrated. The ability to successfully implement an experiential learning methodology may also be dependent upon whether or not an institution has a group of individuals who will take the time to work toward its adoption (Cowitz, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This paper has identified experiential learning methodologies that might be practical for incorporation into a large online university human resources degree program. These include, but are not limited to, simulations, team projects, and increased use of case studies. University administration has indicated an interest in this approach, but has also clearly stated that experiential learning methodologies such as cooperative learning or internships are neither practical nor would they be considered. Research (e.g., Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Libon, Rebollar, & Moller, 2011; Murphrey, 2010) indicates that experiential learning methodologies are widely accepted by learners, and have been accepted by faculty (e.g., Clarke, 2005; Duarte, 2013). The authors conclude that it would be advantageous to define and pursue further action at the academic department level to identify appropriate experiential learning methodologies and to build support for the approach among learners, faculty, and the administration.

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