WHY HAVE WE NEGLECTED VICARIOUS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

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ABSTRACT

The literature of experiential learning has failed, almost exclusively, to address the perspective of vicarious experiential learning in research schema or conceptual models. We have not found any ABSEL references, for example, that focus on the vicarious dimension as a research perspective or as a fully expressed conceptual framework. Therefore, we ask the question "Why have we neglected vicarious experiential learning?" We address this question by reviewing the genesis of vicarious experiential learning from the literature of modeling and self-efficacy. We develop a model comparing vicarious experiential learning with direct experiential learning. The paper concludes with some explanations of the efficacy of vicarious experiential learning and methodological definitions of the concept.

INTRODUCTION

Virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experiences can occur on a vicarious basis through observation of other persons' behaviors and its consequences for them. Many of our behavioral response patterns are thus established through modeling (Bandura, 1969). In cases involving intricate patterns of behavior, such as language acquisition, modeling is an indispensable aspect of learning. Bandura (1977) also points out that we would not want to teach some sets of skills such as surgery or flying an airplane solely on an individual's pattern of hit or miss and/or success or failure experiences.

Vicarious experiential learning (VEL) is thus not only an inescapable aspect of the human condition, it also is undeniably efficacious. Yet, when the literature of management education and development is surveyed, vicarious experiential learning is virtually non-existent, especially when compared to the voluminous literature devoted to direct experiential learning. Furthermore, searching the Academy of Management database, it is almost impossible to find an academic paper or research report in the Management Education and Development literature that does not cite Kolb's experiential learning model [based on Lewin (1951)] or Kolb's 1984 landmark work *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Kolb, 1984). We do note that ABSEL, for the most part, seems to have avoided this "Kolb trap" and has developed its own nomenclature and definitions for the term experiential learning. Nevertheless, following the dominant pattern of the literature, we will also cite Kolb frequently in this paper. However, a survey of the Kolb (1984) index and list of references finds that the phrase 'vicarious' does not appear in the index; and, there is only one citation attributed to Albert Bandura, the guru of vicarious learning, and that cite involves 'the self system.' It would appear that Kolb is only addressing direct experiential learning.

Nor is the Academy of Management alone in this aspect of not addressing vicarious experiential learning; it appears that the ABSEL experiential learning literature has followed suit. A key word search in the Bernie Keys Library for 'vicarious' comes back with zero hits. In addition, ABSEL scholars Gosen and Washbush (2004) performed an exhaustive review of the literature of experiential learning (EL) in *Simulation and Gaming* in the process of assessing experiential learning effectiveness covering the EL literature during the period 1989 to 2004. Their extensive list of over 100 references does not contain a single piece of published EL literature that specifically addresses the topic of vicarious experiential learning. Bresman (2005), addressing the topic of vicarious learning in teams, notes, "vicarious team learning is an under-explored process dimension of what makes teams and organizations effective" (Bresman, 2005, p 2).

So, if vicarious learning is such a pervasive force in the processes of human development, why is it virtually absent in our literature? This paucity of literature leads us to ask the question: "Why Have We Neglected Vicarious Experiential Learning?" In the process of addressing this question, we will examine the literature of experiential learning in general as well as the vicarious learning literature in particular. We will put forth the argument that vicarious experiential learning may be superior to direct experiential learning, and we will illustrate the areas where vicarious experiential learning is potentially more efficacious. The paper will conclude with definitions of vicarious experiential learning, as a process and as a methodology, that we hope will be of some use to ABSEL scholars.

THE VICARIOUS LEARNING AND MODELING LITERATURE

We are limiting the scope of the term 'vicarious experiential learning' to management education applications. However, the term vicarious learning can be found in the management literature under the general topic areas of organizational learning, environmental analysis and strategic analysis. In the bulk of this literature, the actor is the firm, and the firm is characterized as learning from observing and/or imitating

competitors. Some examples are Terlaak and Gong (2008); Baum, Li and Usher (2000); Denreu (2003); and Bengtsson (2004). Since our work focuses on the classroom level, working with groups and individuals as learning targets, we will not address these organizational levels of analysis. Finally, in the excluded category for this paper, we also exclude simulation models where the actor is the organizational entity in virtual environments and organizational settings [for examples of this literature see Gavetti and Levinthal (2000) and Fox (2003)].

Bandura's (1965) research provides us with the general definition of the process of learning vicariously: "The behavior of observers can be substantially modified as a function of witnessing other people's behavior and its consequences for them. Observation of rewarding consequences generally enhances similar performances, whereas witnessing punishing outcomes has an inhibiting effect on behavior." (Bandura, 1969, p. 30). Skinner (1953), albeit a behavioralist who eschewed the cognitive frameworks often adopted by Bandura, also specified reinforcement as a necessary condition for learning through observation.

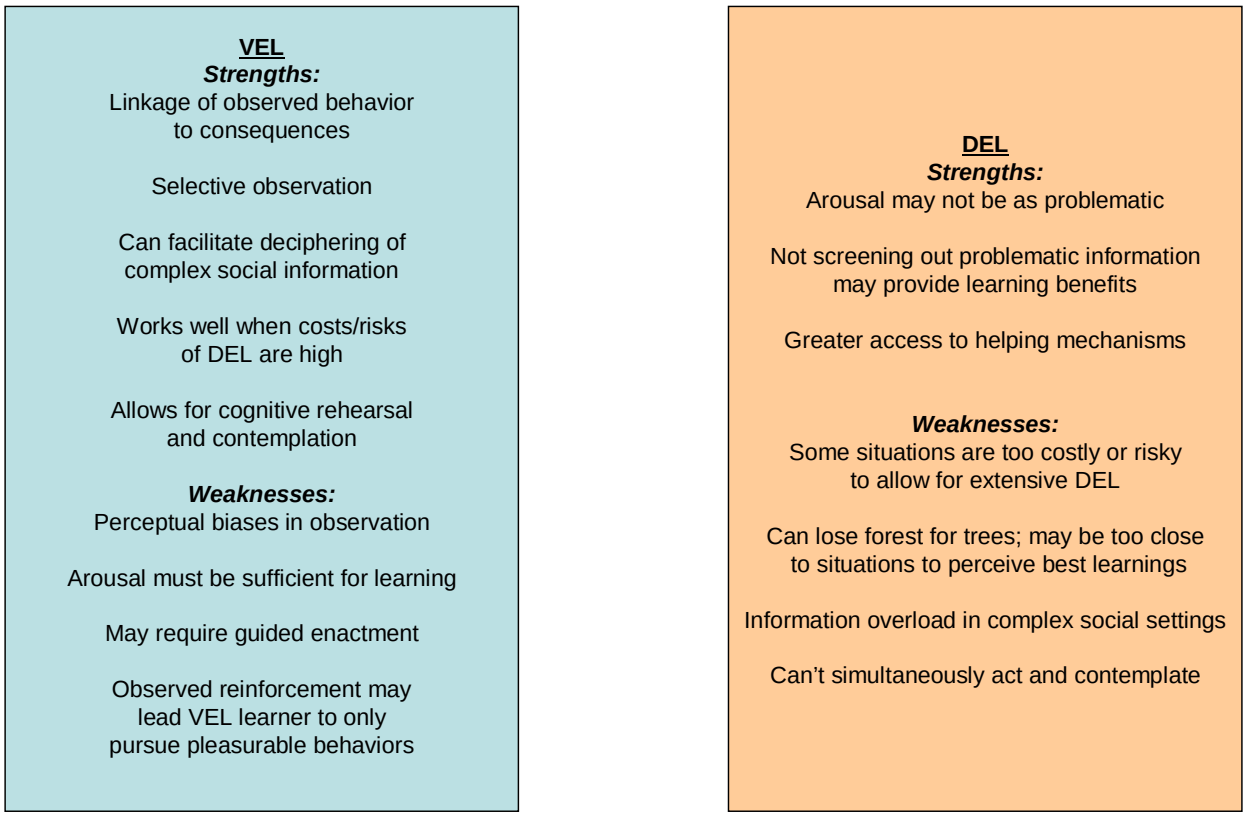
Bandura (1969, p. 118) states that "Modeling procedures are, therefore, ideally suited for effecting diverse outcomes including elimination of behavioral deficits, reduction of excessive fears and inhibitions, transmission of self-regulating systems, and social facilitation of behavioral patterns on a group-wide basis." Application examples cited include acquiring intricate response patterns, conditioning emotional responses, extinguishment of behaviors--- all enhanced and regulated through observing the actions of influential models.

However, vicarious experiential advocates do not claim or infer that such learnings are automatic or mindless. In a passage that further separates Bandura's work form the Skinnerian perspective, he observes that "Actually, people tend to be selective in what they reproduce, suggesting that imitative performance is primarily governed by its utilitarian value rather than by inherent reinforcement derived from response similarity per se" (Bandura, 1969, p. 126). While Bandura's early work (Bandura and Walters, 1963) focused on the observational, as Bresman (2005, p. 5) points out "In later work, he expanded the definition to include both observation and symbols, which can be expressed 'through verbal and pictorial means' (Bandura, 1989, p. 15)." In those situations where intricate patterns of behavior are involved, where multiple actors are involved, or where the costs and risks of direct experiential learning may prove prohibitive, modeling and vicarious experiential learning are irreplaceable.

VICARIOUS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND SELF-EFFICACY

Festinger (1954) put forth a theory of social comparison that was designed to explain self-appraisal and self-esteem through

Figure 1
Comparative Strengths and Weaknesses of Vicarious (VEL) vs. Direct Experiential Learning (DEL)



comparison with others. That groundbreaking work has since been eclipsed with the work done on the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). This is another arena where the research and creativity of Albert Bandura have contributed to the understanding of the power and potential of vicarious experiential learning. Bandura states, in fact, that it takes more than direct experience to accomplish self-efficacy outcomes:

> "People do not rely on enactive experience as the sole source of information about their capabilities. Efficacy appraisals are partly influenced by vicarious experiences medicated through modeled attainments. So modeling serves as another effective tool for promoting a sense of personal efficacy." (Bandura, 1997, p. 86)

We would like to use one of Bandura's models to contrast direct and vicarious experiential learning in the light of self-efficacy. Figure 1 above summarizes this perspective. Bandura (1986) posited a model of four processes governing observational learning. The four elements were: 1) attentional processes, 2) retention processes, 3) production processes, and 4) motivational processes. We will discuss each in turn.

When it comes to attentional processes, the key for vicarious experiential learning (VEL) is selective observation and VEL may have an advantage here. A VEL learning person has the choice to 'separate the wheat from the chaff' at the attentional stage, a luxury the direct experiential learning (DEL) person may not have if they are too situationally immersed. That said, the downside for VEL at the attentional stage is that there must be a sufficient arousal level to trigger learning responses. The VEL learner may be able to see the forest for the trees, but they may not be willing to walk into that forest.

In the retention process, the VEL learner has the advantage of cognitive rehearsal. The DEL learner, caught up in the action of the moment, may not have the time or perspective to rehearse or mentally replay what they are already involved in, particularly because the human brain is a serial, and not a parallel, processor of information. As Hamilton (1859), quoted in Townsend (1971, p. 3) states "the greater the number of objects to which our consciousness is simultaneously extended, the smaller is the intensity with which it is able to consider each." The downside for the VEL learner is that built-in biasing influences could screen out alternatives from consideration. The DEL learning person, already in the fire, cannot screen out the heat they may find uncomfortable. The VEL learning person's screening mechanisms can be fueled by fears or by simple resistance to change, bringing about a profound conservatism:

> "It is slow, painful and difficult for an adult to construct a radically different way of seeing life, however needlessly miserable his preconceptions make him. In this sense, we are all profoundly conservative, and feel immediately threatened if our basic assumptions and emotional attachments are challenged. The threat is real, for those attachments are the principles of regularity on which to predict our behavior and the behavior of others depends…As we grow up, [our belief systems] become more and more difficult to revise, by virtue of their very success. Since new experiences can only be interpreted in terms of what we already know, we are bound to assimilate them to our present understanding if we can. The longer we live, the less likely we are to encounter events that cannot somehow be interpreted within it." (Marris, 1975)

In the case of production processes, VEL is aided by the existing set of sub-skills the learning person may already possess. While the DEL learning person may have to combine experience with in-the-moment learning on the run, the VEL learning person has the advantage of contemplation and chosen personal integration. The downside for the VEL learning person in the production process is that if deficiencies are to be corrected or remedied, then guided learning (Gentry and Burns, 1997) may be needed. The helping mechanisms thus may not be available to the VEL learning person, or may not be accessible due to screening biases or resistance to change as the Marris (1975) quote above illustrates.

Finally, the processes of motivation also aid the VEL learning person. Skinnerian rewards (positive or negative reinforcements) will automatically channel the VEL learning person, even if he or she does not have to experience them directly (Bandura, 1969). The downside for the VEL learning person is that human tendencies to avoid the unpleasant may lead the VEL learner to only pursue those alternatives that are inherently pleasing or rewarding. The DEL learning person, immersed in the fray, has to experience both the positive and the negative simultaneously and unavoidably. Thus, both the depth and breadth of the DEL learning person's experience may be potentially greater than that of the VEL learning person.

KOLB'S MODEL AND VICARIOUS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Kolb's 1984 definitive book on experiential learning has few references to vicarious experiential learning. He does discuss the two primary dimensions of his model of the learning process. His first dimension has concrete experience at one end of a continuum and abstract conceptualization at the other end. The second dimension has active experimentation at one extreme and reflective observation at the other. Kolb concedes that "in the process of learning, one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer, and from specific involvement to general analytical detachment" (Kolb, 1984, p. 31). However, Kolb does not expand on what he means by the concept of 'observer', and thus the Kolb model remains in the realm of direct experiential learning.

We do, however, value Kolb's definition of learning because it fits both DEL and VEL: "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Note that Kolb's definition of learning does not specify if the 'experience' is sourced directly or vicariously. The definition retains the concept that learning is a process and is not defined by its content or its outcomes. Moreover, importantly, the definition retains the concept that learning includes both subjective and objective experience. This is an important distinction for vicarious experiential learning because it is our position that the vicarious learner has a larger range of choices than the direct experiential learner does, whether he or she chooses to exercise them or not.

Finally, it is useful to look at Kolb and Kolb (2005) for a more recent perspective on these issues. Commenting on the four-phase model, Kolb and Kolb (2005) state:

"Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes that is responsive to contextual demands. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner 'touches all of the bases' --- experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting--- in a recursive process that is responsible to the learning situation and what is being learned" (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 194)

We feel that vicarious experiential learning also taps into these processes and thus accomplishes these outcomes.

VICARIOUS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: WHY IT WORKS

Manz and Sims (1981, p. 106) observe, "Observers can often learn faster than actual performers of tasks that depend heavily on conceptual skill because of the latters' need to devote at least some attention to performing required responses." Polanyi (1983, p. 17) talks about the power of what he calls 'indwelling': " Indwelling, as derived from the structure of tacit knowing, is a far more precisely defined act than is empathy, and it underlies all observations." Gioia and Manz (1985) conclude that vicarious learning processes are efficacious in the sense that the processes involved in altering cognitive scripts are facilitated by being able to observe the targeted behaviors.

Many learning theorists extol the benefits of gestation in learning processes. Kolb (1984), for example, includes 'reflection' as one of the descriptors for a phase of his four step learning cycle. This view of the value of gestation is based on the concept of time and of learning over time. However, in a recent study [Giambatista and Hoover (2009) in this volume] our research indicated that when it comes to learning behavioral skills experientially, shorter time periods and compressed experiences (i.e. less gestation) were superior to longer time periods and more reflective experiences. We believe that this finding reflects on the processes of gestation when it comes to VEL. In VEL gestation is not just about time, it is also about psychological space, by being distal in VEL (having the perspective of 'forest') vs. proximal in DEL (having the perspective of 'trees').

VICARIOUS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: AN INTEGRATIVE DEFINITION

We propose the following definition of vicarious experiential learning, integrative of the concepts discussed above and the concept of whole person learning (Rogers, 1980) and an early ABSEL definition of experiential learning (Hoover, 1974; Hoover and Whitehead, 1976) --- by viewing vicarious experiential learning as a process:

Vicarious experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant (s) cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes through processes of observation in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement despite the absence of direct, personalized consequences

As an educational approach, vicarious experiential learning may be viewed as follows:

Vicarious experiential learning pedagogy may be viewed as a methodology of education whereby structure and individual or group experiences are contrived to develop learning and perceptual capacities, to develop and reinforce cognitions, to impact on emotions and attitudes, and, importantly, to function in developing capacities to behave consistently with the insights of these processes and experiences by designing learning systems conducive to observation of behaviors and by conscious processes of providing positive models for imitation.

In closing, we would like to note that all learning reduces to the capacity of the learning person to exercise their newly acquired capacities (Gentry and McGinnis, 2007; Gentry and McGinnis, 2008). As Bandura (1969) notes:

"On the other hand, treatment approaches that employ modeling procedures to establish effective modes of behavior often lack an adequate transfer training program in which clients are provided with opportunities to test their newly acquired skills under conditions likely to produce rewarding consequences" (Bandura, 1969, p. 165).

In other words, if it is all about transferring skills and gaining insight as educational objectives, the bottom line is the ability to garner the consequences we desire. Vicarious experiential learning is a powerful tool in this regard, a tool that perhaps has been 'missing in action' in the experiential learning tool bag. VEL should be examined more carefully, especially given the relative efficiencies of using observational media with larger groups as opposed to the potential 'high cost per unit' media of individualized learning programs via direct experiential learning.

Regardless, the ultimate question for ABSEL is "Does it work?" (Howard, Markulis, Strang and Wixom, 2006). Moreover, if it does work, does it matter if it is done via VEL or DEL? Maybe the real question we should be asking as we select our experiential educational methodologies is--- "Did experiential learning take place? Period!"

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