ABSEL Redux: Reflections after a 25 Year Hiatus

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a collection of personalized reflections and observations about ABSEL and simulation and experiential learning after a 25 year hiatus. I begin by examining the genesis of ABSEL in its early years 1974 to 1982. Contrasts between ABSEL "then and now" are made relative to faculty, administration, students and ABSEL scholarship. The paper concludes with a celebration of "the ABSEL Style" as the factor that not only separated us from rest of the pack at ABSEL's inception, but also gives us a competitive advantage going forward.

INTRODUCTION

Note: In this paper, due to the personal nature of its content, I will not follow the usual standards applied to refereed papers in an academic setting and make an effort to conceal my identity. I also wish to fully recognize that my memories of years past (and my views of the present) may suffer from a "rose colored glasses" effect, a myopic effect, or simply only being able to see what I can see. In this sense, I defer to any reader who can remember what really happened or any reader who may actually know what is going on now.

I was one of the 98 people in Oklahoma City in 1974 at the first ABSEL meeting ever held. I went on to attend ABSEL for a total of nine consecutive years, severing my relationship due to the fact that at that time (1982) I had left the wonderful wide world of academe and I had become a full time entrepreneur and businessman. I returned to academe in 2004 and I returned to ABSEL in 2007 in San Antonio. Thus, my story here is one of heavy involvement in ABSEL (I was ABSEL President in 1980 and I published eight papers in ABSEL Proceedings, etc.) through 1982, and then a return to ABSEL, after a 25 year absence, in 2007. This paper contains my reflections, observations and thoughts upon my return to the fold.

ABSEL: THE EARLY YEARS

As I remember, there was an ABSEL organizational meeting of some sort, convened by Bernie Keys, before we actually gathered in Oklahoma City in 1974. But the consensus memory seems to be that ABSEL was formed at its first meeting. In any event, I somehow emerged from that organizing process with the title of ABSEL Advisory Board Member. I think the only act ever really performed by that Advisory Board was to advise that ABSEL did not need an Advisory Board, and so it disappeared in 1975. Somewhere

in this time frame I remember that I also had the title of ABSEL Public Relations Director. All I can say about that is I must have laid down at least a minimally adequate level of PR, because ABSEL went on to survive. In the 1974 ABSEL Proceedings I published a paper on a conceptualization and definition of "experiential learning," work I gleaned from my doctoral dissertation on experiential learning (which was probably one of the first dissertations on that topic).

The term "experiential learning" was still new and heady stuff in those days. Kolb, Rubin and McIntyre (1971) had published the first textbook/workbook on experiential learning (*Organizational Psychology: An Experiential Approach*) in 1971, and by 1974/1975 that book, which had no real competition as of yet, was beginning to get a number of adoptions at some of the more progressive institutions of higher learning. In fact, I was hired in my first full time tenure track academic position by a new dean of the business school at our university for the express purpose of adding the experiential learning component to our business school's pedagogical mix. I thus found myself not only teaching the first experiential class ever taught at our university, but also designing and implementing it. (Please note that I am making these points not to blow my own horn, but simply to put experiential learning and simulation in the 70's and early 80's in perspective for the reader 30+ years later.) The resulting undergraduate experiential course labeled Organizational Behavior I was tasked to create not only had the highest course ratings on student evaluations, it also got me the honor of being rewarded the as the "Outstanding Business Teacher" designation in 1976 for the College of Business.

The point is that experiential learning and simulation were new to the students, new to the faculty, new to business schools in general and finding a growing level of acceptance and success. Bernie Keys was sharp enough to see all of this going down; thus was ABSEL born. All of the early ABSEL players were excited and highly energized. We could tell that we were on to something, we loved what we were doing, and we believed in what we were doing. It was exhilarating to be part of a collection of talented and innovative individuals who came together to form an association devoted to furthering not only our own teaching effectiveness but also outcomes beneficial to students.

There was a general foreword by Dick Buskirk in the 1975 ABSEL Proceedings, a foreword on simulation written by Stan Vance and a foreword I wrote on experiential learning entitled "Process and Content in Experiential Learning." I took the position in 1975 that "the experiential learning field is still very young and is somewhat

unstructured" (Hoover, 1975, foreword). Dick Buskirk took the position that "There is a fervor (in ABSEL) that is absent in other meetings" (Buskirk, 1975, foreword). It was undeniable that ABSEL was evolving as an association that was establishing its own unique identity. I was also active in the Management Education and Development Division of the National Academy of Management at this same time and the contrasts were notable.

In the 70's I knew almost everyone who was active in the Academy of Management MED just as I knew almost everyone who was active in ABSEL (the groups were not that different in size in those days, although I would guess that the MED has more reviewers now than ABSEL has members). But size was where the similarities stopped. Both groups were looking at experiential learning and simulation as an emerging phenomenon at the time, but the approach was very different in tone and the collegial behavior was very different as well. At the MED sessions people presented a paper to a mostly passive audience, and all seemed eager to bolt out of the meeting rooms so that they could stand in the hallway and be recognized. The MED papers and presentations had a lot of "one-upsmanship" (my sample is bigger than yours, etc.), while the ABSEL papers were all about exploring and expanding the effectiveness of our ability to design and to deliver more effective learning experiences for students. ABSEL sessions were characterized by lots of interaction, and people only left the room to go to the next ABSEL session, where the active and lively "ABSEL fervor" identified by Buskirk would begin anew.

I was Program Chairman in 1978 in Denver, and then as President Elect in 1979 in New Orleans I noted what had by then come to be accepted by ABSEL members: "ABSEL is like no other organization…Our meetings are lively, and highly interactive, and are characterized by high levels of information, idea and technique exchanges. It is these exchanges that caused ABSEL to be born, and it is the contribution of the quality of collegial association in ABSEL that makes it an attractive and healthy organization truly like no other" (Hoover, 1979, foreword). In 1980, in Dallas as ABSEL President, I finally managed to record in writing a verification of what had by then come to be known and recognized by ABSEL members as the ABSEL Style: "As we move toward the future, I am hopeful that we can retain the ABSEL style ---an intellectual environment characterized by an open exchange of ideas and viewpoints, an organization characterized by member input and involvement" (Hoover, 1980, foreword).

ADMINISTRATION AND FACULTY THEN AND NOW

As I mentioned earlier, I was hired to introduce experiential learning by a new dean at our business school. In those days I remember faculty members outside of the Management Area (mostly Finance and Accounting faculty generally) not having much use for "all that behavioral stuff," but I do not remember them rejecting it. It was new, it was working, the students liked it (more on that later), and, if nothing else,

there was an air of curiosity about experiential learning and simulation. I remember both the administration and the faculty having an attitude of something like "let's see what you can do" as simulations were adopted for the strategy classes and experiential exercises were used in behavioral classes. That was then.

Now I see a wide range of reactions from administration and faculty when I talk about simulation and experiential learning. Many simply seem indifferent, but there is sometimes a current of negativity as well. While I used to hear "It's great that our students are practicing and learning behavioral skills," now I hear "Our students need more course content." For example, our College of Business faculty, perhaps for a variety of reasons, voted this year to drop the undergraduate strategy class from the list of required courses for an undergraduate business degree. This potentially downgrades the number of sections offered of the College's largest simulation user. Our accounting faculty recently floated a proposal for accounting majors to drop one of the required MBA behavioral classes (that uses experiential learning) and substitute a CPA Exam cram course.

I fully realize that I am drawing inferences from a small sample size. But my experience in my university has been backed up by conversations I've had at Academy of Management meetings and ABSEL 2007. It appears to me that while simulation and experiential learning adoptions used to more or less sell themselves 25 years ago, now they are a tough sell at best and a rejected or distained methodology at the worst. Part of this may come from the simple fact that 25 years ago this was still "new stuff" and maybe now it's just "old hat." Regardless of the source, I am left with the conclusion that simulation and experiential learning, either applied as a teaching methodology to be considered or a research agenda to be put forth, is much more of an uphill battle than it was 25 years ago.

STUDENTS THEN AND NOW

What I look at students then and now, I wind up focusing on two issues: 1) how students process information, and, 2) how students process experience. In the old days, students were quite willing to assume the decision-making roles of a simulation or the behavioral roles of an experiential exercise. Students seemed to find it exciting to pretend to be the CEO of a company in a competitive marketplace, or to take on a character role in a dynamic communication or group dynamic role play. Some students may have had trouble "getting into their roles", but this seemed to come not from indifference, but from inexperience. I honestly do not remember having trouble in the old days with students throwing up their hands and giving up on an exercise. If they failed or got stumped, I remember students giving it a go a second or a third time until they got it right. Students seemed to welcome the chance to do something in a low risk/high learning reward classroom rather than follow a lecture or prepare for an exam. Importantly, students viewed the experiences they

garnered from simulations and experiential learning as fresh and new, taking them places they had never been before.

But the students of today are products of an era of virtual gaming. On everything from a home computer to an arcade game to an X-Box, the students we have in our classrooms today have probably logged hundreds if not thousands of hours of time slaying dragons, exploring the world of Halo, fighting battles, scoring touchdowns on Madden or surviving the mean streets of Grand Theft Auto. There is a neurological phenomenon called phantom limb syndrome where a person can lose a limb and retain the impression that the limb is still there. Sometimes when I assign an experiential exercise to my students these days I imagine I see them twitch with phantom controller syndrome. I ask them to pretend they are the CEO of a company in a competitive market place and I feel like they have the need to reach for a joystick. It may be hard for today's students to engage in a challenging communication role play where they are required to engage in active listening to understand the other person's point of view, when the night before they reached the apex of the world of Mario Brothers simply by clicking the right buttons the right number of times. The question I ponder now is how much of student boredom when it manifests or students not engaging in exercises comes from the fact that they are conditioned to more "pizzazz" than we offer in many of our simulations or experiential exercises?

The examples above come from how students process experience. The other potential stumbling block for simulation and experiential learning today is how students process information. As I write this in 2007, I Googled "experiential learning." I got 1,790,000 hits in 0.18 seconds. Not bad. I then Googled "business simulation" and got 54,600,000 hits in 0.17 seconds (way to go, gamers!). Trust me when I say that 25 years ago we had no idea (or even the framework of an idea) that such a thing would be possible, that it would be available anywhere we went, and that it would have a zero cost.

But the fact is that the students we now have in our classrooms, except maybe for older MBA students, have had the Google option as part of their lives for as long as they have been old enough to ask questions about information. In other words, they have grown up in a world where all the information they could ever want could be generated in the blink of an eye about any topic they could type on a keyboard (and it's even put in order of "importance" to make it easier). As a result, I have concluded that many of today's students suffer from what I'll call "Google Syndrome." They are conditioned to instant answers, and to having those answers produced not by their own labor and sweat, but instantaneously by the touch of a button. My observation is that Google Syndrome students confuse information generation with insight; or more succinctly, they do not have a learning history or an information processing set of experiences that allows them to appreciate that true insight comes from introspection, self awareness and personal growth. As a result, they may be poorer candidates for simulation or experiential exercises than students of 25 years ago.

ABSEL SCHOLARS THEN AND NOW

There have been several ABSEL scholars who have commented on or studied ABSEL research and scholarship over the years (see Wolfe, 1976; Gentry and Wolfe, 1981; Butler, et al, 1985; Anderson and Lawton, 1996; and Gentry, et al, 1998 for some examples). I'll not pursue that line of analysis in this paper, but I would like to share a few observations about ABSEL scholarship. The first is that the creation and subsequent maintenance of the Bernie Keys Library, as a source of conference papers and research archives, is an amazing and truly meaningful accomplishment. All of the many who have worked to produce the Bernie Keys Library should be very proud of their work product.

One of the things that impressed me about early ABSEL scholars was their willingness, no, make that insistence, that ABSEL research and scholarship had to be introspective and had to retain the capacity to be self-critical. In 1981, for example, Gentry and Wolfe were willing to state that "the heightening of ABSEL's research quality presents a dilemma to the organization" (1981, p.226).

I am delighted to discover, after a 25 year absence, that ABSEL scholars are still coming up with fresh perspectives, and that ABSEL researchers are still exploring new research paradigms. But more important than the freshness aspect of current ABSEL scholarship is the continuing refusal by ABSEL scholars to slip into mediocrity and self replication. I find the continuing absolute quality of ABSEL scholarship to be the second biggest surprise for me.

THE ABSEL STYLE LIVES!

The single biggest surprise for me after a 25 year hiatus was to find that the ABSEL style, that was so unique and so special in ABSEL's early years, still survives to this day. The ABSEL sessions I attended in San Antonio in 2007 were "lively, and highly interactive, and (were) characterized by high levels of information, idea and technique exchanges' (Hoover, 1979, foreword). Dick Buskirk would, I believe, have found a great deal of intellectual "fervor" in the sessions as well (Buskirk, 1975).

I went back and looked at the early explanations of the ABSEL organization, that were probably penned by Bernie Keys, to see if I could find descriptors of not only where ABSEL was conceived as being at its inception, as well as any ideas of where ABSEL felt it was going. In other words, I tried to find the seeds of ABSEL that grew from 1974 to 1982 that sprouted and yielded the "grown up crop" I saw at ABSEL in 2007. Here's what ABSEL's founders envisioned in 1974, 1975, 1976, etc. as the "final analysis" of ABSEL's purpose and identity: "In the final analysis, ABSEL is an association. Its activities and publications are important, but its real meaning is the association among people interested in simulation, games, and experiential learning that ABSEL

hopes to foster and encourage." (Part of the Introduction section from early ABSEL Proceedings).

SUMMARY AND CLOSE

So, what are my main conclusions upon returning to the ABSEL fold after a 25 year hiatus? There are two things really. One is a rediscovery of something that I had managed to lose touch with over the 25 years---that was the reaffirmation that ABSEL really did develop the distinct ABSEL style in its early days, that this "style" was real, and that it was truly worthwhile. The second realization is that ABSEL is "still styling" to this day. Looking into the future, 2008 and beyond, I feel that ABSEL's demonstrated capacity for intimacy and personalized exchanges gives us a competitive edge.

That's not to say that we do not face some challenges as an association of lively colleagues going forward. I've touched on a few of them in this paper. We need to keep our administrators and faculty colleagues convinced of the value of what we offer. We need to shape the design and delivery of our exercises to fit the needs and characteristics of the modern student. And we need to keep our scholarship perspectives fresh as we keep our research designs tight. But most of all, I feel that we need to continue to cherish and polish the ABSEL Style. I'll close this paper by repeating what I said as ABSEL President in 1980. It was a fervent hope I had in 1980, and, after taking a little 25 year break, it is a fervent hope I am happy to say I have today.

As we move toward the future, I am hopeful that we can retain the ABSEL style, an intellectual environment characterized by an open exchange of ideas and viewpoints, an organization characterized by member input and involvement.

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