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WHEN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATORS REFLECT UPON THEIR CRAFT: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on unique, if not unprecedented, qualitative research conducted to increase knowledge and understanding of experiential educators' perceptions of the current state and future of their craft. Perceptual data were gathered using a six-item sentence completion method. Multiple, rich and interesting themes emerged upon analysis of that data set. Additionally, data were gathered on the experiential educators' views of seven dynamics within EL environments and their relative importance.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a condensed report of a recent qualitative research project investigating the perceptions of experiential learning (EL) educators regarding various aspects and dimensions of their work. Based on a thorough review of the existing EL literature, it appears that this is a unique research endeavor in that few qualitative studies of this type have been conducted in our management education discipline. As such, the results offer insight into the thinking and perspectives of an experienced group of experiential learning educators.

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH

As part of our ongoing research on exploratory issues and dynamics in experiential learning contexts, over the past decade we have become very familiar with the literature of the field. One of the startling conclusions we arrive at is that there is an *incredible* scarcity of what we call "self-reflective" research in the literature. Self-reflective research, from our perspective, represents study of what experiential learning educators *think* and *feel* about what they do and how they do it.

The concept of self-reflective orientation is not unique to us. Schon (1983) has noted that reflective practice allows one to think about how one is doing something and even change how one thinks, feels and behaves based on reflection. A similar perspective is supported by Caffarella & Barnett (1994) who suggest that reflection can lead to changes in thinking, feeling and behavior in the future. In the domains of research, self-reflective or reflective study most often involves qualitative methods.

When looking at ABSEL, the Academy – MED, and OBTS, one finds that there is much dialogue and study of things such as teaching methods, activities and exercises, simulations and games, assessment of learning, classroom management, learner characteristics, and general state-of-the-art updates on the field. There is hardly anything that relates directly to self-reflective research.

We feel that this research is both unique and appropriate to the study of experiential learning. While we have not conducted a perfect study nor necessarily captured a fully-generalizable sample, this research represents self-reflective research of interest to experiential learning adherents.

Hence, we will attempt to accomplish two things in this background section. First, we will explain where we are coming from with this research. Secondly, and drawing on the literature as best we can, we will relate what we are doing to the perspectives of others.

Our Orientation: While we believe that all the good EL work is worthwhile, we have been increasingly focusing on a self-reflective and/or reflective approach to our studies in experiential learning. We believe it is essential that experiential learning educators reflect on our collective experiences and behaviors within the learning endeavor. We may learn something we need to learn.

During the period from 1992 to 1994, Maddox and Boozer (1994) conducted a three-iteration Delphi study of experiential learning. A goodly amount of the content for the current survey was developed as a result of reflection on the responses of the academics and practitioners in that research effort. More recently, we have been considering issues of faculty expectations and experiences (Maddox and Forte, 1999) and student learning readiness within experiential learning contexts (Maddox, Forte, & Boozer, 2000). In both efforts, we have asked experiential learning faculty to think about things they might not normatively reflect upon. This study extends that effort.

Supporting Orientations: As noted above, there has not been a great deal of "self-reflective" research in experiential education. Patz, Keys, and Cannon (1999) reported the results of a study in which they polled ABSEL

fellows and directors to ascertain experiential educators' views of ABSEL's future. Within their results emerge general themes related to the widespread transformation of teaching and learning processes from traditional lecture formats to interactive, learner-centered experiential contexts. In a different orientation, Gosen and Washburn (1999) systematically reflected on their differing simulation teaching styles using 11 comparative factors (i.e., team composition, grading, debriefing). While insightful, the article represents only a sample of two perspectives.

In a broader study of perceptions and attitudes toward simulations and gaming in the U.K., Cherrington and van Ments (1996) interviewed 18 tutors about their views of simulations and games. They found that tutors were reluctant to use such methods because they perceived that students might feel uncomfortable with such methods and that they, the tutors, might lose control of the learning context.

SAMPLING, METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Sampling: During the summer of 1999 over 500 EL surveys were sent to a random sample of ABSEL, Academy-MED, and OBTS members. Fifty-eight usable surveys comprise the sample from which this research emerges. While the return rate is a somewhat disappointing 12%, it is not surprising given the response requirements of qualitative inquiries. The qualitative data gathered are interesting and instructive.

Forty-four of the 58 respondents were male (76%). The average age of the sample was 51 (range = 30 – 70 years) and the average length of experiential learning practice is 26 years (range = 3 to 46 years). These numbers suggest that the sample is a seasoned, experienced group of educators.

Methodology: For this research report, focus will be on two facets of the overall survey: the six-item sentence completion task and the "Importance of Learning Climate Dimensions" ranking. The six sentences respondents completed are as follows:

- The most difficult part(s) of Experiential Learning for me is (are):
- The most meaningful aspect(s) of Experiential Learning for me is (are):
- Learners who consistently resist Experiential Learning methods and opportunities are:
- I've grown as an educator/trainer by using EL methods and philosophy because:
- The most positive trend(s) in the field of Experiential Learning is (are):
- The most negative or dysfunctional trend(s) in Experiential Learning is (are):

The Climate Dimensions component of the survey asked respondents to rank order seven factors (Comfort Level, Relevance, Profound Learning, Open Communication, Energy, Democracy, and Experimentation) in terms of "how significant you feel them to be" in contributing to an effective experiential learning climate.

Data Compilation and Analysis: Responses to the sentence completion items were transcribed into grouped databases for each item. The researchers independently and thoroughly reviewed the response set for each item and extracted key themes within each item data grouping. We then came together to compare and refine the definition of primary themes within each item data grouping. Those primary themes are reported and briefly discussed in the results section.

For the climate dimensions rank ordering, the quantitative data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and descriptive statistics were run for the total sample and for comparisons of male and female rank orderings. Those results are tabled below in the results section.

RESULTS OF SENTENCE COMPLETIONS

Given the space limitations of this paper, we will only provide the primary themes that emerged from our thematic analysis of the sentence completion items. These are the themes that most clearly emerged from looking at the aggregate qualitative data for each item. Themes are not presented in any hierarchical manner at this time. Themes are phrased to best capture the inherent essence of each theme.

THE MOST DIFFICULT PART(S) OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR ME IS (ARE):
• Debriefing of activities and exercises to meet learning objectives
• Covering course content (principles & theory) within experiential processes
• Relinquishing control to learners and going with the flow
• Addressing differing needs and styles of diverse learners
• Responding to resistant learners conditioned to behave more passively
• Managing time and preparation requirements of EL

A dominant theme among responses is the difficulty in creating meaning for learners from experiential activities. The challenge of debriefing is cited often, consistent with previous empirical findings and prescriptive notes (Dennehy, Sims, & Collins, 1998). While numerous researchers have addressed these issues over time, related

concerns remain over the integration of experiential learnings with course content in ways that facilitate learners' higher-level understanding of the material.

Taken together, these themes reveal continuing challenges for experiential educators. These results indicate agreement that experiential learning methods require not only the commitment of more time and energy than traditional pedagogies, but also departure from the normative instructor-controlled learning environment. Respondents indicated difficulties in letting go of control, trusting the process, and in essence letting EL methods work without "resorting" to traditional lectures for conveying course content. Also clearly within these themes is a dominant student-centered teaching orientation. Responses indicate concerns about learner resistance to EL methods and the need to address the myriad learning styles and preferences of students to create improved learning outcomes.

THE MOST MEANINGFUL ASPECT(S) OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR ME IS (ARE):
• Seeing learners experience the "a-ha" moments of breakthrough thinking
• Facilitating learner growth and personal change through self-discovery
• Making learning relevant to learners in classes and throughout their careers

Regarding meaningfulness, respondents focused on the extrinsic rewards of witnessing their learners' breakthrough moments. Framing these themes within the aforementioned years of experience of our respondents, it is interesting to note that several respondents cited the growth and personal development of their learners over time. It appears that educators are receiving positive feedback from learners several years after classroom experiences, when learners have actively applied (Kolb, 1984) their learning to real career and life situations.

LEARNERS WHO CONSISTENTLY RESIST EL METHODS/OPPORTUNITIES ARE:
• Conditioned and/or programmed for linear, passive learning
• Shy, introverted and/or unwilling to engage in risk taking
• Fearful, threatened or afraid of self-disclosure and vulnerability
• Stylistically rigid with preferences for high structure, concrete sequential & left-brain learning modes

As learning readiness is a topic of ongoing inquiry for us, we are encouraged that the present research indicates it is of growing interest to our respondents as well. We received more responses from this item than any of the other open-ended questions. Results indicate that a key inhibitor of learner willingness to engage in EL practices is the deeply ingrained conditioning of students in the traditional model of the omniscient educator professing knowledge from the front of the classroom. Respondents acknowledged that many learners are resistant to the active and reflective demands of EL practices and posit that such resistance may stem from learners' personal inhibitions. Those who consistently resist experiential methods are perceived to be shy or reserved, less tolerant of ambiguity, fearful of risk taking, and closed to self-discovery processes. Further, their preferences for more structure and linear learning contribute to their lack of willingness to fully engage in the EL process.

I'VE GROWN AS AN EDUCATOR/TRAINER BY USING EL METHODS BECAUSE:
• I learn about myself and become more self-aware
• I am exposed to new ideas/perspectives through learner experiences and insights
• I experience an enhanced connection and rapport with students
• I become more open to student-centered learning

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that EL methods enable their own learning processes in the form of personal discovery as well as exposure to the alternative frames and perspectives of their learners. Several stated that EL practices have facilitated their own professional development by making them more cognizant of learner needs and outcomes. Such enhanced student orientation leads some respondents to remark that stronger connections with learners are a dominant reward in their careers.

THE MOST POSITIVE TREND(S) IN THE FIELD OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IS (ARE):
• Wider acceptance and higher legitimacy for EL methodology
• Greater usage in a wide variety of learning contexts
• Increase in computer applications and methods, including simulations
• Stronger opportunity to provide cross-disciplinary applications

The positive trends cited by respondents yield an encouraging view of the future of experiential learning. Themes include a greater acceptance of EL methods by educational institutions at all levels, accrediting bodies and corporate markets, thereby increasing the perceived legitimacy of the craft. With greater acceptance come increased usage of EL methods and a healthy maturation of the field. Looking to the future, themes include opportunities for the further development of experiential learning as simulations capitalize on the prevalence of computer technology and provide greater opportunity to integrate across business disciplines.

THE MOST NEGATIVE/DYSFUNCTIONAL TREND(S) IN EL IS (ARE):
• Preparation and processing time required to do an effective job
• Misuse of EL methods by untrained faculty with a poor understanding of EL processes
• Ill-conceived use of EL by educators looking for quick fixes
• The difficulty in setting clear learning objectives and assessing outcomes

Asked to describe the negative or dysfunctional trends in experiential learning, respondents offered insights that parallel their prior identification of difficulties in using EL. Among the themes is the time commitment for planning and debriefing EL activities. Relatedly, several respondents cited a bandwagon effect emerging in the EL field. Of concern are the users of EL who are "doing it for the sake of doing it" and those who lack the requisite skills and training to engage in EL effectively. Consistent with the difficult parts of EL discussed previously, the challenge of linking EL methods to course content and learning assessment measures surfaces as a dominant trend for the future.

RESULTS OF RANKINGS

The final part of our research report presents the respondents' rankings of the seven dimensions of effective learning climate. While countless other dimensions could be posited as important elements, we have limited our analyses to those dimensions derived from the ongoing Delphi study (Maddox & Boozer, 1994) for the sake of parsimony in these exploratory inquiries.

Results reveal that the three most important dimensions of effective learning climates are Relevance, Open Communication, and Comfort Level. Relevance, defined as the extent to which studies support real world application of learning, practical application, and the clarification of student outcomes, is clearly a mandate of AASCB and other accrediting bodies and reflects a fundamental value held by many business education practitioners. Open communication as a climate dimension includes multi-directional dialogue, the use of conflict for constructive and collaborative problem solving, and freedom from politics within the learning environment. Rated as third most important, Comfort Level involves the creation of a relaxed, safe, trusting learning climate. The rankings of climate dimensions are presented below.

RANKING OF IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING CLIMATE DIMENSIONS
Overall Sample (n = 58)
1. Relevance (average rank 3.14)
2. Open Communication (3.34)
3. Comfort Level (3.39)
4. Experimentation (3.95)
5. Energy (4.5)
6. Profound Learning (4.53)
7. Democracy (5.13)

CONCLUSIONS

As part of an ongoing research endeavor, this paper reports results from exploratory analyses dealing with the challenges and rewards of experiential methods, future trends in the discipline, and important dimensions of effective learning climates. While space limitations preclude a complete research summary, we offer preliminary findings and an invitation to other experiential educators to join us for an interactive session at the 2001 ABSEL Conference. Clearly, these issues are of concern to each of us as we move forward as EL practitioners. Self-reflective learning, research and dialogue can help all experiential learning educators enhance their craft.

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