

**Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999**  
**ABSEL'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES IN THE 90S**

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**ABSTRACT**

In an attempt to capture the contribution of ABSEL to experiential exercises in the 1990s, proceedings papers for that decade were classified into three tiers (full, condensed, interactive); three tracks (exercises, simulations, multimedia); three categories (actual, assessment, design/ administration); and eight fields (marketing, OB/HRM, Policy, etc.). This analysis revealed some interesting events, terminologies, and trends. These included the advent of the condensed paper, the emergence of multimedia as a third track, the inclusion of practitioners, the development of a trend toward interactive workshops, and the invention of some new terms such as cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and jigsaw. Some suggestions are offered for exercises in the future.

**INTRODUCTION**

One custom that was instituted in 1990 was the condensed paper -- sort of a second-tier option for work slightly less well developed than that in full papers. (Condensed papers were limited to two or three pages depending on the year.) This idea seems to have allowed people to get preliminary work accepted and published in the proceedings without excessively expanding the proceedings.

Although the focus of this paper is experiential exercises in the 90s, we compared the experiential track to the simulation track in terms of numbers of papers published. During the 90s, the lion's share of the full-papers tier went to articles on simulation (158 simulation, 94 exercise). There were also more condensed papers on simulations (92) than on exercises (76). Reasons for these differences vary depending upon whom you ask. The simulation people say their articles are superior, the experiential people say their reviewers are more demanding and conscientious. Such is the ABSEL way! Our insightful outgoing

president thought up another reason -- it is easier to gather data for research studies with simulations than with exercises. Although that may be true, exercises are very useful for gathering data if they are designed to have participants respond to questionnaires about the process and outcomes.

One more reason for papers on simulations being more numerous than those on exercises is the welcome trend toward interactive sessions, workshops, roundtables, and panels. During the 90s, there were almost twice as many such papers on exercises (84) as on simulations (46). Could it be that it's easy to whip off a Cudworthian brief about a notion on how to debrief exercises, or about a workshop called "The ABSEL Fellows Game," or one entitled "Striptease?" What reviewer could resist that, depending on who's stripping and of what? The bottom line is, we know what people like Alan Cudworth (or Wheatley, or the Geneseo bunch) can do in a workshop. We know we will like it and will probably want to adopt it for our students. The length of the paper in the proceedings, full or condensed, is irrelevant. ABSEL is small and we know each other. The downside of this is the cadre. Although it would be naive to deny the cadre, somehow the cadre is open and it seems to expand continuously. You come to two or three meetings and you're in. Such is the ABSEL way! That's one thing that hasn't changed during the 90s.

One thing that has changed, although unplanned, is a new track that seems to have emerged. In 1996, it became evident that we had a third track, which we suggest might be called "multimedia." If a "track" represents a large number of papers devoted to a specific method of delivering learning, then multimedia must be a track. Learning is indeed delivered through multimedia and an increasing number of papers in our

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

proceedings address multimedia. These papers generally focused on using electronic technology for learning methods such as: computer-mediated video conferencing, distance learning, virtual reality, computer spreadsheets, computer telephony, the web, and the internet. This new track could be a significant part of ABSEL's future, especially to the extent that modern technology can facilitate interactive learning both within and without the classroom. Nevertheless, we need to be careful not to use these modern methods of presentation simply as ways to spice up and legitimize lectures when interactive learning is appropriate. The future of ABSEL (and perhaps universities in general) in a mass-media world of TV, distance learning, and the web lies in personal, reciprocal interaction within relatively small groups of learners.

A fourth track, "neither," includes papers that could not be categorized as exercise, simulation, or multimedia. These papers varied in scope and in terms of their fit with ABSEL. They addressed topics such as the past, present, and future of ABSEL; characteristics of ABSEL contributors; research on teacher evaluations; and how to write a case or a textbook.

Another unfolding pattern for ABSEL proceedings papers in the 90s was their distribution in terms of categories (type of process) and fields (type of content). The process categories were: design/administration, assessment, and actual. Papers classified as design/administration discussed ways to design or develop an exercise, what to expect, how to run an exercise, or how to debrief or analyze one. The assessment category included papers on evaluating the effectiveness of an exercise in

terms of student learning, using exercises for evaluating students for grading purposes, or using exercises for research purposes such as testing hypotheses. Assessment also included evaluations of ABSEL itself and development of plans for ABSEL's future, as with the Merlin Exercise. Papers in the actual category usually described or demonstrated specific exercises. Most of the interactive workshops fell into this category.

Nine content fields were identified, following Krippendorff (1980) and Weber (1985). They were cross cultural (dealing with international issues or diversity); decision making (including problem solving, management science, quantitative techniques, and MIS); finance and accounting; marketing; OB and HRM (including communication); policy and entrepreneurship (including small business); production and manufacturing (including TQM); general learning (a rather large category with an increasing trend including papers on topics such as learning by doing, increasing excitement of learning, service learning, and definitions of learning); and finally "other" (including infrequent yet important fields such as ethics and outdoor programs).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows frequency counts of ABSEL proceedings papers in the 1990s, classified by tier and track. Table 2, derived from Table 1, portrays these frequencies as percentages of all papers published in the proceedings each year. Since the numbers of papers on exercises (including multimedia) varied from 16 in 1994 to 39 in 1993 and 1998, percentages seem more relevant than raw frequencies because percentages correct for the sizes of the conferences.

**TABLE 1**  
**ABSEL PROCEEDINGS PAPERS DURING THE 90S: FREQUENCIES**

		1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	TOT
<b>Full</b>	<b>Tier</b>										
	<b>Track</b>										
	Exercises	10	7	10	17	10	9	6	10	15	94
	Simulations	20	18	26	11	19	20	12	20	12	158
	Multimedia	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	4	8
	Neither	8	3	8	2	6	3	5	3	0	38
<b>Condensed</b>	Exercises	18	9	9	9	2	11	10	2	5	75
	Simulations	18	9	9	15	4	7	2	12	16	92
	Multimedia	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	2	7
	Neither	10	5	6	8	3	2	3	2	1	40
<b>Interactive</b>	Exercises	7	4	5	13	4	17	3	20	11	84
	Simulations	2	2	3	4	9	9	4	11	2	46
	Multimedia	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	6
	Neither	0	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	1	6
<b>TOTALS</b>		93	58	79	79	57	79	52	86	71	654
	<b>All Exercises</b>	35	20	24	39	16	37	19	32	31	253
	<b>All Simulations</b>	40	29	38	30	32	36	18	43	30	296
	<b>All Multimedia</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	6	8	21
	<b>All Neither</b>	18	9	17	10	9	6	8	5	2	84
<b>All Interactive</b>		9	7	11	17	13	27	10	32	16	142

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

The data showed no statistically significant trends with a sample size of only nine years. However, Table 2 shows some “notable” trends for the 90s including an increasing number of full papers on exercises and the aforementioned increasing number of papers on exercises in interactive

sessions. An additional finding shown in Table 2 is the emergence of papers on multimedia beginning in 1996. ABSEL might want to nurture this trend and direct its focus on interactive learning.

**TABLE 2  
ABSEL PROCEEDINGS PAPERS DURING THE 90S:  
PERCENTAGES OF TOTALS EACH YEAR**

		1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	TOT
<b>Full</b>	<b>Track</b>										
	Exercises	11	12	13	22	18	11	12	12	21	14
	Simulations	22	31	33	14	33	25	23	23	17	24
	Multimedia	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	6	1
	Neither	9	5	10	3	11	4	10	3	0	6
<b>Condensed</b>	Exercises	19	16	11	11	4	14	19	2	7	11
	Simulations	19	16	11	19	7	9	4	14	23	14
	Multimedia	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	2	3	1
	Neither	11	9	8	10	5	3	6	2	1	6
<b>Interactive</b>	Exercises	8	7	6	16	7	22	6	23	15	13
	Simulations	2	3	4	5	16	11	8	13	3	7
	Multimedia	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	1	3	1
	Neither	0	2	4	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
		101	101	100	100	101	100	102	98	100	99
	<b>All Exercises</b>	38	34	30	49	28	47	37	37	44	39
	<b>All Simulations</b>	43	50	48	38	56	46	35	50	42	45
	<b>All Multimedia</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	7	11	3
	<b>All Neither</b>	19	16	22	13	16	8	15	6	3	13
		100	100	100	100	100	101	100	100	100	100
<b>All Interactive</b>		10	12	14	22	23	34	19	37	23	22

Table 3 classifies the papers on exercises in terms of the three categories and nine fields (including “other”). Table 4, derived from Table 3, shows the percentages of papers published each year in each of the category-by-field cells. Table 5 portrays these percentages with the three categories combined. One notable finding is the spike in cross-cultural papers in 1993. One reason for this might have been that international

management was one of the themes for that meeting in Savannah. Also, there seems to have been a preponderance of papers in the field of OB/HRM; but this gave way to papers on general learning in the later half of the decade, especially in 1996 and 1998. The increasing focus on general learning seems beneficial since it might portend an ABSEL without boundaries between disciplines.

**Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999**

**TABLE 3  
PAPERS ON EXERCISES: FREQUENCIES**

Category	Field	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996*	1997*	1998*	TOT
		Hnlu	Nvllc	LV	Svnh	SD	SA	Orlnd	NO	Maui	
<b>Actual Exercises</b>	Cross cultural**	5	3	0	11	3	2	1	3	6	34
	Decision making***	0	1	0	0	0	1	3	2	4	11
	Finance & Acctg	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	0	5
	General learning	0	0	1	2	1	4	2	7	7	24
	Marketing	1	3	0	2	0	1	1	4	2	14
	OB & HRM	8	6	8	3	2	10	3	8	6	54
	Policy & Entrpnrshp	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	3
	Prdctn & Mfg	1	1	5	3	1	0	0	0	0	11
	Other	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	4
<b>TOT ACTUAL EX</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>160</b>	
<b>Assessment</b>	Cross cultural**	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	5
	Decision making***	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	5
	Finance & Acctg	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	General learning	3	0	3	4	1	4	2	1	3	21
	Marketing	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	OB & HRM	3	1	2	0	4	3	1	2	1	17
	Policy & Entrpnrshp	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Prdctn & Mfg	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Other	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>TOT ASSESSMENT</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>56</b>	
<b>Design &amp; Admin</b>	Cross cultural**	1	0	0	5	0	1	2	0	0	9
	Decision making***	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3
	Finance & Acctg	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
	General learning	2	0	0	2	1	2	7	3	3	20
	Marketing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	OB & HRM	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	0	9
	Policy & Entrpnrshp	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	6
	Prdctn & Mfg	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
	Other	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
<b>TOT DES &amp; ADM</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>58</b>	
<b>Grand Totals</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>274</b>	

\* Includes papers on Multimedia.

\*\* Includes "international" and "diversity."

\*\*\* Includes "problem solving," "management science," "MIS," and "quantitative techniques."

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

**TABLE 4**  
**PAPERS ON EXERCISES: PERCENTAGES OF TOTALS EACH YEAR**

Category	Field	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996*	1997*	1998*	Tot
		Hnlu	Nvll	LV	Svnh	SD	SA	Orlnd	NO	Maui	
<b>Actual Exercises</b>	Cross cultural**	14	15	0	28	19	5	4	8	15	12
	Decision making***	0	5	0	0	0	3	12	5	10	4
	Finance & Acctg	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	8	0	2
	General learning	0	0	4	5	6	11	8	18	18	9
	Marketing	3	15	0	5	0	3	4	11	5	5
	OB & HRM	23	30	33	8	13	27	12	21	15	20
	Policy & Entrpnrshp	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	5	1
	Prdctn & Mfg	3	5	21	8	6	0	0	0	0	4
	Other	0	0	4	0	6	3	0	0	3	1
<b>TOT ACTUAL EX</b>		<b>43</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Assessment</b>	Cross cultural**	0	0	4	5	0	3	0	3	0	2
	Decision making***	3	0	0	3	0	3	0	3	3	2
	Finance & Acctg	6	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	General learning	9	0	13	10	6	11	8	3	8	8
	Marketing	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	OB & HRM	9	5	8	0	25	8	4	5	3	6
	Policy & Entrpnrshp	3	5	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Prdctn & Mfg	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Other	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOT ASSESSMENT</b>		<b>31</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Design &amp; Admin</b>	Cross cultural**	3	0	0	13	0	3	8	0	0	3
	Decision making***	3	0	0	0	0	3	4	0	0	1
	Finance & Acctg	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	0	0	1
	General learning	6	0	0	5	6	5	27	8	8	7
	Marketing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	1
	OB & HRM	3	5	4	3	6	3	4	5	0	3
	Policy & Entrpnrshp	6	5	0	0	0	3	0	3	3	2
	Prdctn & Mfg	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Other	6	10	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	2
<b>TOT DES &amp; ADMIN</b>		<b>26</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>21</b>

\* Includes papers on Multimedia

\*\* Includes "international" and "diversity."

\*\*\* Includes "problem solving," "management science," "MIS," and "quantitative techniques."

**TABLE 5**  
**PAPERS IN THREE CATEGORIES COMBINED:**  
**PERCENTAGES OF TOTALS EACH YEAR**

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996*	1997*	1998*	Tot
	Hnlu	Nvle	LV	Svnh	SD	SA	Orlnd	NO	Maui	
Cross cultural**	17	15	4	46	19	11	12	11	15	17
Decision making***	6	5	0	3	0	9	16	8	13	7
Finance & Acctg	6	0	4	0	0	6	8	8	0	4
General learning	15	0	17	20	18	27	43	29	34	24
Marketing	6	15	0	5	0	3	4	11	10	6
OB & HRM	35	40	45	11	44	38	20	31	18	29
Policy & Entrpnrshp	9	10	0	3	6	3	0	3	8	4
Prdctn & Mfg	3	5	25	13	6	0	0	0	0	5
Other	9	10	4	0	6	6	0	0	3	3

\* Includes papers on Multimedia

\*\* Includes "international" and "diversity."

\*\*\* Includes "problem solving," "management science," "MIS," and "quantitative techniques."

The dearth of papers on production and manufacturing was surprising (Table 5). With the exception of 1992 and 1993, there were very few, and none after 1994. In 92 and 93, TQM was a theme. In 1992, a team from the U.S. Navy presented the keynote speech on the Navy's total implementation of TQM. Thus, the emphasis on production and manufacturing in those two years. Perhaps that field could benefit from a marketing effort by ABSEL, and ABSEL might find recruiting fruitful there.

Other fields that seem under-represented, according to Table 5, include finance/accounting and policy/ entrepreneurship, each with only four percent of the total; marketing with only six percent of the total; and decision making with only seven percent of the total. This despite the fact that the decision making field included problem solving, management science, MIS, and quantitative techniques. Although exercises might be perceived as inappropriate as aids to learning in the quantitative fields, they are being used successfully in manufacturing plants in

conjunction with the nominal group technique. Further, the emphasis on self-managed work teams in the work place suggests a need for experiential exercises in the fields of production/manufacturing and decision making. Here are two other recruiting targets for ABSEL.

A final observation from Tables 3 and 4 is the preponderance of papers on actual exercises. Many of these actual exercises were presented in interactive sessions, which seems to be an appropriate theme for ABSEL. This fact is of questionable benefit to ABSEL, however, since the papers on actual exercises are written and published at the expense of those on assessment and design/administration. There were almost three times as many papers on actual exercises as there were on either assessment or design/administration. Should we strive for a balance? Or are we happy with this ratio?

In addition to the quantitative content analyses, it is noteworthy that some new terms were introduced in the ABSEL proceedings of the 90s -

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

- at least new terms to me. One of these was jigsaw. Even after reading three articles referring to jigsaw, I still was not sure what it was, so next time I talked to Lee Graf on the phone I asked him. He didn't know either but he thought it might refer to a method of learning likened to a jigsaw puzzle. In a jigsaw format, he conjectured, students would collaborate on a problem in teams. Each student's contribution to the solution would represent one of the pieces to the puzzle. If, together, all team members had all the puzzle pieces, they could put the puzzle together and solve the problem. That sounded logical to me, but it was clear that Lee was making things up as he went along and we still don't know what jigsaw is. But we think that's what it is.

Two other notable terms were collaborative and cooperative. In the middle of the decade, 1993 to 1997, a number of authors distinguished between collaborative learning and cooperative learning. Although not all authors were specific about the differences, it seems that collaborative learning uses teams of participants who work together, learn together, and receive rewards together for their work. Cooperative learning differs from that process in two respects. First, cooperative learning focuses on how to learn in groups and ensures interdependence among students. Second, cooperative learning provides for individual accountability such that students' grades depend on individually completed tests and papers rather than undifferentiated group grades.

Another theme from the proceedings of the 90s suggests that the effectiveness of an exercise does not come from the activities and interactions of the exercise itself, but from the total anatomy of the exercise. Several ABSEL contributors have emphasized the importance of the debriefing, but there is more than that to an exercise done effectively. Consider that, in order to make the most of an exercise, facilitator and participants need to attend to every one of the following nine steps.

1. Prior to the exercise, study the relevant material.

2. Review the objectives of the exercise.
3. Be aware of group members' characteristics before the exercise.
4. Listen to the briefing and ask questions if you do not understand the exercise.
5. Participate in the role play. Observe the activities, interactions, and consequences of the exercise.
6. Get involved in the debriefing -- make comments, ask questions, take notes. (The debriefing might be the most important aspect of an exercise.)
7. Read related material.
8. Write up an analysis of the exercise. Use a number of conceptual models to explain why people behaved, communicated, and reacted as they did. Note whether the learning objectives were achieved.
9. Seek feedback on your analysis.

If I might follow the lead of ABSEL's contributors in the 90s, two suggestions come to mind for future emphasis in ABSEL. One of these addresses the problem of the system boundary. Happily, we seem to be moving away from discipline-specific thinking toward learning about the interdependencies in organizations -- and toward learning how to learn. For example, Jack Welch, disgusted with the building of empires and hoarding of information at General Electric, declared boundarylessness a way of life at GE. Boundarylessness has also become the approach to education for a number of excellent business schools such as Babson and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. These schools have synthesized several courses into team-taught modules that integrate several disciplines. This approach discourages the compartmentalization of knowledge that victimizes many students. In the standard business curriculum, the capstone strategy course is intended to serve as the integrator. However, that is far too late, as evidenced by an undergraduate's comment on a teacher evaluation I read recently while serving on a promotion and tenure committee. The course was business strategy. The student said, "I am not a graduate student and I shouldn't have to



## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

remember everything I learned in marketing, finance, economics, and accounting in order to pass this management course.” What are we doing to our students?!

A second suggestion addresses relevance. We know business students appreciate and even demand relevance. If they can't use the knowledge, they believe they are wasting their time. Kurt Lewin's argument that there is nothing as useful as a good theory falls on highly skeptical ears of undergraduates and MBA students. As facilitators of learning in business fields, we must show students how to use theories (“models”) to solve relevant problems. Moreover, we must make our exercises relevant. One way to do this is to follow the lead of case writers who visit organizations, learn from them, and describe their problems as cases for students to analyze and solve. The experiential-exercise counterpart of this approach is called action learning. Here, the exercise developer would visit an organization and, instead of writing up a case, would use a real business issue to design an experiential exercise such as a role play or group problem. Another, more immediate approach in evening MBA courses, where the students are practicing managers, would be to solicit real problems from students in class. These problems can then be converted into exercises, either by the teacher or by the students themselves, and solved by the students. Although we, as teachers, might appreciate the relevance of our canned exercises, it is the students' perceptions that count. Without this perception of relevance, our exercises do not seem very effective any more.

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