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ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies the basic norms/values of experiential learning and specifies ethical dilemmas that experiential educators face in their practice. Often, experiential educators have overlooked basic ethical dilemmas they create and face in their pedagogical approach. The authors provide suggestions designed to reduce the extremity and impact of ethical dilemmas experiential educators face, although these dilemmas are innate to the pedagogical approach.

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning (EL.) is very popular in management today (Burton, 1990; Lau and Shani, 1988). However, little attention is explicitly given to ethical dimensions of E.L. educators who use games, group exercises, self-assessment tools, simulations, and process learning methods. Management educators have seemingly overlooked inherent ethical dilemmas in experiential learning.

While experiential learning has many merits, we must recognize inherent ethical double-binds in our methods and take proactive steps to address these issues. If we choose not to do so, we are vulnerable to traditional and reactionary critiques of our methods and potential liability for alleged damage incurred by students. This paper identifies ethical issues we face, while discussing ways that experiential educators can best structure and practice within an E.L. orientation.

CORE VALUES AND NORMS IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Specifying the pivotal norms and values of Experiential Learning (E.L.) is important to our discussion of pedagogical ethics. Marcic (1989) suggests E.L. pivotal norms include: 1) shared responsibility for learning; 2) activation of both cognitive and emotional processes during learning; 3) a focus on learning objectives that include knowledge transfer as well as skill and attitude development; and 4) active participation of students in the learning process.

From our own O.B., O.D., and Strategy classes at both public and private institutions, other value factors emerge including: 1) a student-centered focus for learning; 2) reduced hierarchical distance between educator and students; 3) creation of an open, fair, and interactive classroom climate; 4) promotion of student empowerment; 5) affirmation of individual differences; 6) balance between content and experiential aspects of learning; and 7) realization that we are all learning how to learn within the class.

Creativity also represents a core value of EL. as it results from the “experientialism and experimentation” that is innate to the method (Ward and Gomolka, 1989). Student and educator creativity enhances learning and emotive growth. In a preface to students, Burton (1990) provides classroom guidelines that reflect E.L. norms and values. Among these are student involvement, genuineness, honesty, sincerity, and sharing.

Our pedagogical norms and values represent a major shift from traditional teaching methods which position educators as “controllers” of learning. In this “expert model”, classroom climate is often adversarial, instructor-centered, content-driven, and replete with gamesmanship. This approach mirrors the images of “psychic prison” and “dominance system” (Morgan, 1986) by constricting self-expression and creativity within the learning enterprise. That is hardly our goal as experiential educators who value creativity.

ETHICAL DOUBLE-BINDS IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CONTEXTS

This section specifies ethical dilemmas which experiential educators face and provides several examples of their existence in E.L. Our intent is not to generate collegial conservatism or neuroticism. Rather we believe it's important to acknowledge the types of ethical binds we often create as we enlighten and enliven learning.

1) CONFIDENTIALITY OF DISCLOSURES - Where group exercises or self-assessments are used, a conflict exists between students' ownership self-disclosures and the confidentiality of these disclosures outside class. We desire candor and honesty from students although we cannot assure them that disclosure will not lead to external ridicule or damage. We may face liability if harm comes to a student as a result of such breaches.

Recently, this bind became dramatic as a result of a discussion of AIDS in the workplace. A student disclosed that a relative had AIDS. While the class handled the disclosure maturely, the student later was harassed by other students who acquired the information despite the fact the class had struck a vow of confidentiality prior to the discussion.

2) VOLUNTARY VS. MANDATORY PARTICIPATION - In E.L., “participation” is a key performance criteria when everyone is expected to contribute to class progress. This demand for participation disfavors immature, learning-impaired, or introverted students. Students who lack an option to participation they may be labeled as “deadbeats” by educator and students alike. These students are in a “one-down” bind that could potentially damage them emotionally and evaluatively.

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 18, 1991

Examples can be found in activities where students confront something they fear or are anxious about, be it speaking before a class or self-disclosing personal history. Such activities engender stress and experiential educators who overlook this possibility can be accused of dictating stressful situations to students that may endanger their privacy or emotional stability. At the same time, it is nearly impossible for us to make decisions about who is "fit" enough to be involved in an activity or to waive participation for certain students. If we had to do so, we would avoid anything that is fun, risky or community-building.

3) VALUE PROJECTION ON STUDENTS - Because most experiential educators accept previously described norms and values, we project these dimensions into our classes where our values establish classroom tone. Alternative value perspectives are few since syllabi (imposed on us by our own authority system) define our "contract" with students.

For example, imagine you randomly assign students to project groups based on your belief that this mirrors the real world. In actuality, your view is based on a single, albeit educated, perception of the real world. Since your view is neither the only nor best perspective on the "real world", students must learn within your bias. A second example involves self-awareness techniques such as Johari's Window wherefrom students theoretically discover their blindspots from others feedback. Again, such activities are value-driven because one must believe that such learning is intrinsically valuable or the activity would be discarded. While value projection is avoidable in teaching, its consequences in E. L. may be more extreme than in traditional teaching since we often ask students to take more risks and to challenge themselves.

4) INFORMED CONSENT - Experiential learning is quite similar in many ways to research. We undertake an activity with an intentional format (independent variable) and observe the effects of the activity on students (dependent variable). With research, we have a general idea about the Outcome of the experimental treatment. In E.L., this is rarely the case.

In research, we must acquire subjects' informed consent so they have general knowledge of a treatment and any potentially unpleasant aspects of subject status. They can then make informed decisions about their participation. In E.L., rarely go to such lengths to stage exercises, although almost F. L. seems pseudo-experimental. Since we cannot predict (or control?) the general and specific dynamics and outcomes of an activity, we are vulnerable to accusations of failing to adequately inform students of the potentially adverse consequences of a activity despite the fact that it may have been used many times without adverse effect.

5) MANIPULATION AND DECEPTION OF STUDENTS - While we intend never to manipulate students, such accusations may occur when students are bid to the "actual" purposes of an experience, especially when such a disclosure compromises potential learning. One author uses a student-generated exam format (Maddox, 1990) wherein students write questions for their exams. As a result they

exercise ownership in evaluation and define the parameters of their study. However, accusations of manipulations still arise from students and traditional colleagues. It is the perception of manipulation that creates this double bind.

Perceived manipulation is of primary concern with teaching students new to E.L. because we ask them to transform their mindsets about and involvement in learning, their reactance to this shift may serve as feelings that they're being manipulated.

6) EVALUATION IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - Since reducing hierarchical distance and fostering a positive learning climate are central to E.L., evaluation is problematic because it works against these factors. Herein, we must balance the roles of facilitator and authority figure. This is difficult since many students enter classes with a priori suspicion of educators and their motives.

In our experiences, students sometimes make the assumption that experiential classes are "easier" than other classes. This impression may arise because E.L. classes are often enjoyable, equitable, and positive as compared to the general classroom experience of students. Students who apply this assumption can be disappointed when their desired performance expectancies don't equate with rigorous evaluation of their work. In such cases, the instructor becomes the "bad guy". This, in turn, increases distance and disharmony.

7) DEALING WITH NON-COMPLIANCE - Because the values and norms of E. L. break the mold of traditional teaching, many students initially resist and distrust the E.L. approach. Most of us still get a kneejerk when students confront and question our existing practices. While we try to be non-authoritarian, our own doctoral training, in most cases, has indoctrinated us to the power dynamics of higher education and to a subconscious authoritarian image of teachers.

Through in-class antics or our-of-class agitation dissident students may undermine positive classroom climate. Outliers" and resisters who seem unable to accept learning as an open, honest, and collaborative endeavor frequently detour class attention and energy. Whether such students are indirectly expressing their discomfort with a new method or "playing-out" personal authority issues, their passive-aggressive stance hampers the evolution of classroom bonding.

Our bind is to determine the degree to which the overall interests of the class supercede the limited interests of - individual or small group of disgruntled students - a utilitarian dilemma. It becomes our task to acknowledge the perspectives of such students, while simultaneously protecting the integrity of entire group. Failing to do so may lead other students to doubt our sincerity and value congruence.

8) THE USE OF SELF-ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES - Many experiential learning texts contain self-assessment instruments and such activities are important in E.L. However, there is an inherent danger in the unschooled use of such techniques since students encounter assessments very seriously and often are naive to their intended purposes. A student can

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 18, 1991

easily misconstrue the meaning of a “test” score and integrate inaccurate self-information into his/her self-concept.

In major psychological literature on testing (Anastasi, 1976; Cronbach, 1970; Sundberg, 1977), great attention is given to testing issues. The psychological profession has strict guidelines and requirements for the use of instruments. These principles protect the subject and increase quality control in testing. It is highly unlikely that most of us in E.L. have training in psychological testing. We may at times be using instruments that we don't fully understand or that are provided in text without adequate basic usage specifications. Obviously, such usage violates practice norms in the behavioral sciences and can be strong grounds for litigation if damage comes to a student from testing/debriefing negligence.

Again, we reiterate that we discuss these issues only because they exist inherently in our work. The threat to E.L. is that we may grow complacent in acknowledging their existence. Attention now turns to general ways in which we can exhibit both ethical and value congruent practice.

COPING WITH VALUE AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN E. L.

If the reader accepts that these are important issues for experiential educators to consider, then we must take proactive steps to cope with the issues as best we can. This section addresses those coping measures. For many experiential educators, these guideline may be inherent dimensions of their current practice. For others, it may be an initial consideration of the relationship between how one approaches learning and how well one creates a positive learning climate. In either case, it appears from a review of our literature that these guidelines have rarely been discussed.

Know Thyself

We must have a high degree of self-knowledge particular to our personal and professional values as well as to our biases and blindspots. Because ~ project these dynamics into our teaching, a failure on our part to “own” them, personally and with students, can lead to the aforementioned dilemmas. As we ask students to become more aware of their values and perspectives, we must periodically review our own and determine how these affect our teaching. Further, it seems well that we also “take” the same instruments we ask our students to complete and be willing to discuss our own reactions to the results. This is both good for our professional growth and facilitative of more effective teaching in E.L.

Articulate Your Learning Philosophy

From our collective experiences, today's students seem forever in search of certainty and structure. The competitive, career-focused orientation of higher education today appears to reinforce this need. By articulating the dimensions and dynamics of E.L. as well as how we got to where we are as educators, we provide students with some confidence that there is system, safety, and sanity to the method. We must clearly explain the benefits of E.L. from our past

experiences, the underlying values of the process, and the types of exercises and activities that the class will experience. If students understand a class and the varied experiences they'll encounter, they'll be less reactive and more open to learning challenges and the challenges of learning we present to them.

Practice Self-Disclosure

While we should avoid the trap of “war storytelling” in class, students appreciate hearing of our experiences. Even more so, in a context where they're asked to be candid, they appreciate hearing our views of issues, theories, and problems. This doesn't mean they'll accept our perspective as “truth”; nor should they. Rather they resonate with our willingness to “put our cards on the table” just as we ask them to do, especially when we can explain how we, developmentally, arrived at a particular conclusion or perspective. Remaining overly objective in our communications with students increases our distance from them. Self-disclosure signifies our humanness and our fallibility and provides students with a context for understanding both us and the broader world.

Model Value Congruence

Beyond owning our value systems, we must practice what we preach by avoiding tokenism, duplicity, disrespect, or dishonesty. Students watch for our inconsistencies just as employees watch supervisors who operate in a “two-faced” manner. This requires that we remain positively vigilant with ourselves as well as willing to present ourselves as fallible when we stray from our pivotal values perspectives. Few things can “putrify” classroom climate more quickly than the perception that an instructor is playing games with students or being ingenuine.

Practice Counseling and Coaching Behaviors

The counselor and coach roles best exemplify the focus of E.L. By accepting a holistic view of students and by framing learning in a developmental perspective, we help them evolve a self-reliant learning capacity, a repertoire of decisional and interpersonal skills, and emotive maturity that can be generalized to many live venues. Counseling and coaching require that we remain aware of our impact on our students so that we their freedom to grown in a positive learning climate. Support is the key. By remaining approachable, visible, and emotionally-accessible to students we become more than just their teachers.

Encourage Open Dialogue and Feedback

We must encourage and allow time for open dialogue between ourselves and students. Sometimes this dialogue can be topic-specific and other times it can range into non--class themes and discussions. Some of the more powerful dialogues that we have experienced have dealt with questions such as: 1) How do people really learn?; 2) Are their spiritual metaphors in organization thinking?; 3) How would an alien civilization describe the life/work style of this era?; 4) What is an art versus a science and how does management fit into the model? Such dialogue can broaden the intellectual vistas of our

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 18, 1991

students while helping them think in different ways from the norm of B-School.

Regular feedback sessions can help us understand how well our objectives are being met in students' eyes, while opening channels for collaboration.

From students' input we become aware of impasses or concerns they hold. If dialoging is periodic, problems can be mitigated as we create activities that help a class transcend such roadblocks.

Acquire Continuing Education and Training

The concept of lifelong learning is almost a euphemistic today. To keep our skills and knowledge contemporaneous we should avail ourselves of classroom, conference, and workshop learning opportunities. This is particularly applicable in the psychological testing realm if we use such instruments. Most universities offer one or more courses in testing theory and applications. Taking classes in other disciplines can also awaken us to the connections that bind many if not most of the social and behavioral sciences. This can help us transcend the disciplinary parochialism that pervades today's higher education.

Recognize and Manage Classroom Power Struggles

Overt or covert reliance on authority by an experiential educator can undermine class trust and continuity. While the easiest solution to a difficult problem may be to squash it, it behooves us to avoid this escape. Rather, we should turn conflicts into simulations where mature parties work toward a suitable win-win outcome. By transforming such episodes into learning opportunities, we demonstrate value congruence, openness, and good faith with our students and avoid reinforcing their authority issues with us.

Discourage Student Dependency

In our society, students are conditioned to become dependent on teachers. This conditioning carries over to E.L. classes. We must resist the impulse to rescue our students and allow them to discover how to individually "learn how to learn". We provide the appropriate ambience and materials for learning as we facilitate and guide learning so they find their personal best way.

CONCLUSION

While experiential education is very popular today, it may face challenges in the future from those who object to our values and methods. To forestall such critiques, we must be aware of the ethical dilemmas inherent to our practice and be willing to pedagogically create conditions that reduce the double-binds we face. Some of these binds cannot be eliminated, but good faith practice on our part is the ethical road to take.

REFERENCES

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