LIFELONG LEARNING AND ABSEL: AN INQUIRY DEFINITION AND RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning is a major issue in education. But it is rarely defined and much of what is said relate. to the need for it and the way it is fostered through administrative practices. An initial inquiry of ABSEL members showed great interest in lifelong learning and its possible relationships to simulation and experiential learning. Members were surveyed on the definition of lifelong learning as an attitude, activity, or skill. They were asked how simulations and experiential learning could impact on lifelong learning. And they were asked to identify the factors in simulations and experiential learning that might impact favorably on experiential learning.

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning. Many people write and talk about it. Schools say they have to foster it and accommodate both the need for it and the people who do it. John Naisbitt, futurist and author of Megatrends talks about both lifelong learning and lifelong learners.

> By century's end, 85 percent of workers will be in the information/service sector, disciplines requiring lifelong learning and frequent re-educating and retraining. (Naisbitt, 1982)

In Re-inventing the Corporation, Naisbitt says more.

> In a world that is constantly changing, there is no one subject or set of subjects that will serve you for the foreseeable future, let along for the rest of your life. The most important skill to acquire now is learning how to learn.

> In the new information society where the only constant is change, we can no longer expect to get an education and be done with it. There is no education, no one skill, that lasts a lifetime now. (Naisbitt, 1985)

So the following questions, related to lifelong learning, could be very important to the field of simulation and experiential learning.

1. What is lifelong learning?

2. What is lifelong learning's relationship to simulation and experiential learning?

3. What factors in simulations and experiential learning might support lifelong learning?

AN INQUIRY ON LIFELONG LEARNING AND ABSEL

These questions are not easy to answer. The project undertaken here is not intended to be the definitive answer to any of these questions. It is designed to b. the first inquiry in a multi-step project to relate lifelong learning to ABSEL's mission, its continuing efforts to define simulation and experiential learning. And it is supportive of the efforts to develop a definitive model of learning based on simulation, and experiential activities. The first step was an inquiry of the current ABSEL membership on the issues of lifelong learning and its possible relationship to simulations and experiential learning.

Survey Methodology

A single page survey was designed and mailed to 110 current ABSEL members. 53 completed surveys were received, & 48% response rate typical of ABSEL member's willingness to examine issues. A profile of the respondents in shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Survey Respondents

110 Surveys Mailed to ABSEL Members
53 Usable Response. -- 48% Response Rate

Simulation Users:	84.3%
Simulation Author/Developer:	44.7%
Experiential Users:	83.0%
Experiential Author/Developer:	62.0%

Functional Areas

Human Resources Management	32.1%
Marketing	22.6%
MIS	9.4%
Organizational Behavior/Management	54.7%
Accounting	7.5%
Policy	45.3%
Production/Operations Management	15.1%
Finance	3.8%
Economics	1.9%

What is Lifelong Learning'?

The first question posed was "what is lifelong learning?" Is it

> An activity that people undertake?

> An attitude that people possess?

> A skill that people develop?

The survey asked respondents to distribute a total of 100 points to the three options. The 100 points could be distributed in any way the respondent desired, from 0 to 100 as long as the total equaled 100 points.

ABSEL members agree -- and disagree -- on what lifelong learning is. While overall, the evaluation favored lifelong learning as an attitude, each possibility was strong defended or denounced by somebody. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
What in Lifelong Learning?

	Mean	Low	High	Std Dev
Attitude	54.42	0	100	25.50
Activity	32.30	0	100	23.27
Skill	13.27	0	50	11.70

The opinions of ABSEL respondents varied widely as the ranges and standard deviations indicate. But the comments were few and tended to reflect a very strong positive or negative view on the definition of lifelong learning.

Sorry, lifelong learning is a series of activities under total control of the learner. That includes pedagogy. N

People involved in simulation/experiential exercises tend to remember concepts learned longer. Zn both forms of learning the student is more. likely to remember and apply concepts to future situations. Zn this way such learning facilitates life- long learning. "As an attitude, you can feed it but difficult to develop if you don't have it. Impact from Simulation and Experiential Learning

The next question asked "To what extent do you feel simulations and experiential learning can impact positively on lifelong learning?" The respondents felt very strongly that simulations and experiential learning could impact on lifelong learning. The mean value on a 1 to 7 scale, 1 for little impact, 7 for significant impact, was 5.73. The distribution of responses is shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Impact of Simulations and Experiential Learning on
Lifelong Learning

1	Little Impact	0.0%
2		0.0%
3		5.9%
4	Average Impact	5.9%
5		23.5%
6		39.2%
7	significant Impact	25.5%

The first question provoked a clear argument on exactly what lifelong learning is. The second produced more agreement on the potential impact of simulations and experiential learning. A wide range of opinion was not expressed. Only 5.9% of the respondents felt that the impact was less than average. And the same percentage felt it was average. The vast majority felt the potential for positive impact on lifelong learning from use of simulations and experiential exercises as above average. 64.7% of the responses were significant or very significant impact (6's or 7's).

Characteristics that Enhance Lifelong Learning

The next question asked respondents to identify characteristics of simulations and experiential learning that, in their experience, would foster lifelong learning. Multiple responses were encouraged. The respondents felt that the most significant factors for simulations were both their realism and the level of involvement. For experiential exercises, level of involvement was the single most important factor. A profile of responses is shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Factors that Encourage Lifelong Learning in
Simulations and Experiential Exercises

	simulations	Experiential Exercises
Realism	82.0%	66.0%
Level of Complexity	60.4%	43.5%
Level of Involvement	84.0%	95.8%
Multiple Right Answers	42.9%	53.2%

In this preliminary inquiry, I wanted to get a clear set of opinions yet collect some new input. I wanted new characteristics listed as much as I wanted respondents to evaluate my proposed list of characteristics. Thirty percent of the respondents added comments or specific characteristics to this section. Many of the comments were the same for both simulations and experiential exercises. A

few pointed to sons of the differences between the two simulations - Additional. Characteristics

Interest of the student
Relevance to the student
Expertise of the teacher
Social aspects of group work
Timely performance feedback
Fun, enjoyment.
Capture feelings of instructor.
Facilitator

Simulations may not be quite as relevant to lifelong learning especially the computer oriented simulations.

Safety when introducing the learner to new (threatening) ideals, feelings, activities, exploration.

The facilitator can make the exercise or simulation either rewarding, or a waste of time.

Depends on having choice about exposure to learning situation, previous attitude about learning, whether tests will be given and will count for anything, etc.

Experiential Exercises -- Additional characteristics

Provokes insightful thinking
Facilitator
Debriefing/Applicability
Structure as a guide to the thought process

Applications to real situations - familiar and relevant subjects

Does the same as simulations but in a more "pointed" or directed fashion.

I have found that the real challenge (complexity) is found in the participants rather than in the exercise.

Causes person to question previous assumptions

some Further statistical Exploration

Hopefully ABSEL will define lifelong learning and speculate on its relationship to simulations and experiential learning. Then it will be necessary to examine the issues based on some traditional ABSEL breakdowns of membership. In this preliminary inquiry, I did some statistical testing of the data to explore some possible questions. Once the terms have been more clearly defined and the next step ideas formulated on the questions, these relationships may be pursued more thoroughly. One of the problems is seen frequently in ABSEL research of its own members. Too many members are both users and developers. Too many respondents are involved in both simulations and experiential exercises. Members represent all functional areas of business education. In a few experimental tests for differences, the subgroup sizes were not large enough to yield significant results.

However, this project was started as an inquiry into possible relationships. It is therefore appropriate to examine the data for some possible trends. This information will be helpful in determining the content and direction of the next steps in the project. To develop these trends, a breakdown of the questions about what lifelong learning is and on the possible impact of simulations and experiential exercises was developed based on users, developers, and functional areas. The data are summarized in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5
Breakdown of Results by Users/Developers

(Mean Values)

	Activity	Attitude	Skill	Impact
Total Group	32.30	54.42	13.27	5.73
Users				
- Simulations	31.66	55.24	13.09	5.68
- Experiential	34.88	51.04	14.07	5.71
Authors				
- Simulations	30.71	55.71	13.57	5.81
- Experiential	35.21	51.50	13.28	5.63

Table 6
Breakdown of Results by Functional Areas

(Mean Values)

	Activity	Attitude	Skill	Impact
Total Group	32.30	54.42	13.27	5.73
Human Resources	38.22	47.29	14.47	5.62
Org Behavior /Management	35.59	50.24	14.16	5.74
Product ion /Operations	32.50	54.37	13.12	5.75
Marketing	38.64	47.73	13.64	5.67
Accounting	50.00	37.50	12.50	5.75
Finance	35.00	50.00	15.00	6.00
MIS	35.00	51.00	14.00	6.00
Policy	30.72	59.63	9.63	5.77
Economics	20.00	60.00	20.00	6.00

The Views of Users. Developers, and Functional Areas

It seems that both users and developers of experiential exercises view lifelong learning as more of a skill than an attitude compared to users and developers of simulations. Conversely the users and developers of simulation viewed lifelong learning as more of an attitude. There appeared to be no difference in ratings of lifelong learning as a skill, nor on the possible impact of simulations and experiential exercises on lifelong learning.

Analysis of the possible relationships based on functional areas was particularly difficult because of small subgroups. For the purposes of identifying possible trends, any group with less than 10% of the total responses was eliminated. With this adjustment, policy respondents had a higher rating on attitude than all other groups, apparently significantly higher than several. Human resources and marketing had higher values for lifelong learning as an activity. Again there were very few indications of differences for the skill category and the possible impact.

Some Critical Questions

Before drawing any conclusions or suggesting the next steps, I want to pose and discuss the questions of two critical survey responses. The first, an early response to the survey was quoted earlier.

> Sorry. Lifelong learning is a series of activities under total control of the learner. That includes pedagogy.

ABSEL's long efforts to define simulation and experiential learning, to understand why the techniques work better in teaching business subjects, have never spurned the issue of motivation. Research in the ABSEL literature has clearly established the point of student interest in simulations and experiential exercises. If any component of the equation, the technique or the motivation of the learner, is under total control of the learner, the efforts of the teacher are meaningless. While ABSEL will continue to struggle valiantly with the question of results, the organization exists because it believes we do have some impact (control) over the Learning process.

> Would ABSEL members have different responses if this asked about the learning of young people? I don't think the survey tells you much more than that believers are believers.

ABSEL members have seriously looked at the Learning process of simulations and experiential exercises from a number of perspectives including age. The answers to the questions would clearly be different because the survey didn't ask ABSEL members to define learning in young people. My initial hypothesis was that there was little in the way of a definition of lifelong learning. Everybody talks about but nobody knows exactly what it is. A literature research revealed much about the subject and how to accommodate lifelong learners. It revealed little about the definition of the term or exactly what ought to be accommodated. A more thorough literature review is planned for the next step of this project. Everybody Bays people should do it but nobody has explored how to get people to do it.

ABSEL has always argued, probably because believers are believers, that simulations and experiential learning works. The attempts to define our terminology and research have clearly generated substantial proof, at least of our efforts. Even the fans of "if it feels good, do it," have argued the position primarily as a devil's advocate. The constituencies of ABSEL, deans, department chairs, and students, are placing an emphasis on lifelong learning. The first step in undertaking an emphasis on lifelong learning needs to be some debate and clarification of what it is. And for ABSEL, the next step is to pursue the relationships and the activities of the users and developers of simulations and experiential exercises.

CONCLUSIONS

The research accomplished its goal: to begin an inquiry into lifelong learning and its relationship to simulations and experiential exercises. The ABSEL respondents clearly defined lifelong learning as a combination of attitude, activity, and skill. The values given to each component established a clear priority of the elements. ABSEL members clearly believe that simulations and experiential exercises can have a significant impact on lifelong learning. Both the strength and distribution of opinions on this question established a clear viewpoint. But on the question of how simulations and experiential exercises impact lifelong learning, the position is not as clear. Both simulations and experiential exercises scored high on "realism" and "level of involvement." But cases and other techniques have realism and a high level of involvement.

The Next Steps

Some of the next steps are clear. Others will be determined by the first step; debate among ABSEL members. The results of the inquiry need to be discussed and examined in the ABSEL forum. Points of contention need to be clarified, defended, and sharpened. And the specific factors in simulations and experiential exercises need to be developed. One deeper project would be to ask simulation and experiential exercise authors to identify very specific characteristics of their materials that fit the definition of lifelong learning and/or foster lifelong learning. As an example, clearly open to the debate mentioned above, I believe that students being allowed to fail safely in a simulation with a focus on learning not performance demonstrates to students that learning is a safe process. Contrast this (as an

example) to a course taught by lectures and exams- -where failure means failing to pass the course. But this example is deliberately vague. Simulations and experiential exercises need to be examined for more specific characteristics that can impact on lifelong learning.

Instructor behavior will need to be considered also. While the instructor variable was mentioned by several people, the instructor is a variable in any teaching technique. So the question would become: what can the instructor/facilitator do with a simulation or experiential exercise that is different -- that can impact more positively on lifelong learning than an instructor using cases or lectures.

The questions remain many -- and difficult. The ABSEL style will enliven the process, create more unanswered questions, and direct any future research. But the issue of lifelong learning as an important component of our educational and training efforts is clearly important. As ABSEL believes it is on the cutting edge of teaching in the business classrooms, it must also place itself on the cutting edge of lifelong learning.

REFERENCES

Naisbitt, John. (1982) Megatrends, New York, NY; Warner Books.

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