

# A REVIEW OF EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES IN ABSEL'S PUBLISHED PROCEEDINGS

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to present an historical review of experiential exercises presented at ABSEL since 1974. The authors believe that this is the first attempt to categorize the 176 experiential exercises presented at ABSEL from 1974 to, and including, 2009. The paper first defines or describes what an Experiential Exercise (EE) is, then provides several tables, graphs and charts showing the number of experiential exercises per year; the principal subject or topical areas of the experiential exercises; the main activities used in experiential exercises; and, the major contributors to experiential exercises. Finally, the paper develops a standard set of protocols and recommends its use for future submissions of experiential exercises to ABSEL.*

## INTRODUCTION

The ABSEL mission statement states,

ABSEL is a professional association whose purpose is to develop and promote the use of experiential techniques and simulations in the field of business education and development....Currently the organization is on the leading edge of developing and assessing business simulations and experiential exercises (<http://www.absel.org/>)

A visitor to the ABSEL website might assume that equal consideration is given to simulations and experiential exercises in ABSEL and, the visitor might be correct. However, if this same visitor reviewed the articles in the ABSEL Proceedings since ABSEL's inception in 1974 to the present, the visitor might be surprised to find that only a

small percentage (about 8%) of the total articles published by ABSEL were actual experiential exercises (EEs). This is not to say that in addition to articles that simply present experiential exercises there were not also articles that focused on the value of experiential exercises or the benefits of using an experiential exercise approach. There were a number of these, including articles where an experiential exercise was used as part of a research design to conduct research on one or more learning goals (Cormany & Feinstein, 2008; Macintosh, Gentry & Stoltman, 1993). For example, there have been several articles about the benefits and pedagogical value of using experiential exercises (or, an experiential exercise approach) to teaching (Gosen & Washbush, 2004; Gentry, *et al.*, 1996; Graf & Kellogg, 1986; Burns & Gentry, 1977), as well as many articles where an experimental or quasi-experimental design was used to test one or more learning goal(s), (Wheatley, *et al.*, 1994; Macintosh, Gentry & Stoltman, 1993; Crino & Hoover, 1980; Basuray, *et al.*, 1979).

Conversely, there have been several articles published in the ABSEL Proceedings on specific simulations, and on research issues related to simulations. There also have been several ABSEL articles reviewing and/or categorizing ABSEL's research efforts in the area of simulations (Faria, 2000; Butler, Markulis & Strang, 1985; Wolfe, 1981; Wolfe, 1998). Nonetheless, little has been done to review, catalogue or evaluate experiential exercises. The principal purpose of this paper is to take a first cut at cataloguing experiential exercises presented at ABSEL since 1974. The paper first defines or describes what an experiential exercise is, then provides several tables showing the number of experiential exercises per year, the principal subject or topical areas of the experiential exercises, and the main activities used in experiential exercises. The paper also provides some information about the major contributors to experiential exercises. Finally, the paper develops a

standard set of submission protocols. This set of protocols is based on what the authors believe are the “best” structured and formatted experiential exercises presented at ABSEL. The authors recommend that future submissions of experiential exercises use these protocols.

## EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE DESCRIPTION & METHODOLOGY

The authors spent considerable time trying to determine exactly how to define or delimit an EE. Several textbooks and readers were consulted (Marcic, 1995; Pfeiffer, 1985; Hall, *et al.*, 1982). Unfortunately, most of these works were not helpful in providing a succinct or precise definition or description of an experiential exercise, probably because of the large and varied field of experiential exercises. Nonetheless, the authors felt some kind of definition—or at least a set of parameters—was needed as a way to start a classification scheme. It was decided that for an exercise to be classified as an EE, it needed to meet at least 5 criteria. They are:

1. it had to be conducted within a single class period;
2. there must be a stated learning goal and/or theme;
3. there must be some type of student involvement;
4. the exercise must have been developed by the authors (or, at least most of the exercise). This criterion is specific only for the purpose of classifying experiential exercises for ABSEL; and

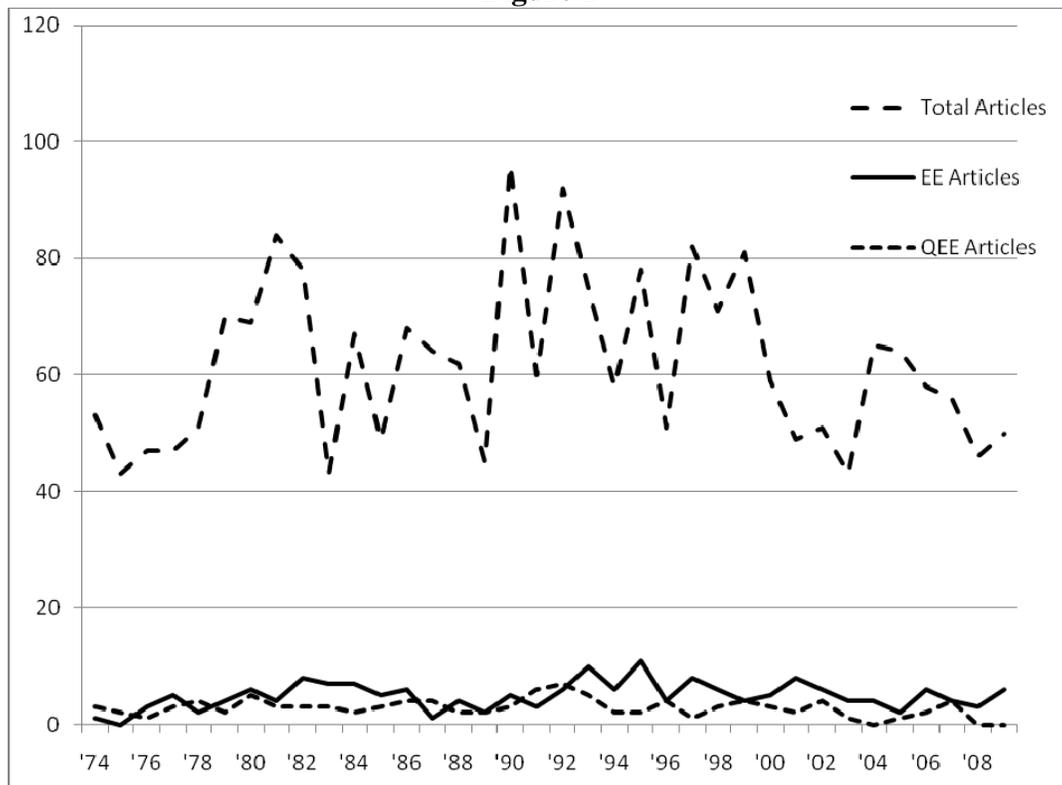
5. there must be a basic description of how it works and/or how it is to be conducted.

The authors acknowledge that criterion one is rather arbitrary, if not controversial. The five criteria were established simply for classification purposes and do not *ipso facto* exclude exercises which would require more than one class period. Given that exercises longer than a single class period are still *bona fide* experiential exercises, the authors simply classified them as quasi-experiential exercises (QEEs) and, for the most part, treated them as a distinct category. The reader should be aware that for this research effort the authors did not analyze QEEs as extensively as they did EEs. Given these parameters, it was found that of the 2,225 articles that have appeared in ABSEL Proceedings from 1974 to 2009, 176 were EEs and 100 were QEEs. Figure 1 below shows the number of EEs, number of QEEs and the total number of articles published by year in the ABSEL Proceedings.

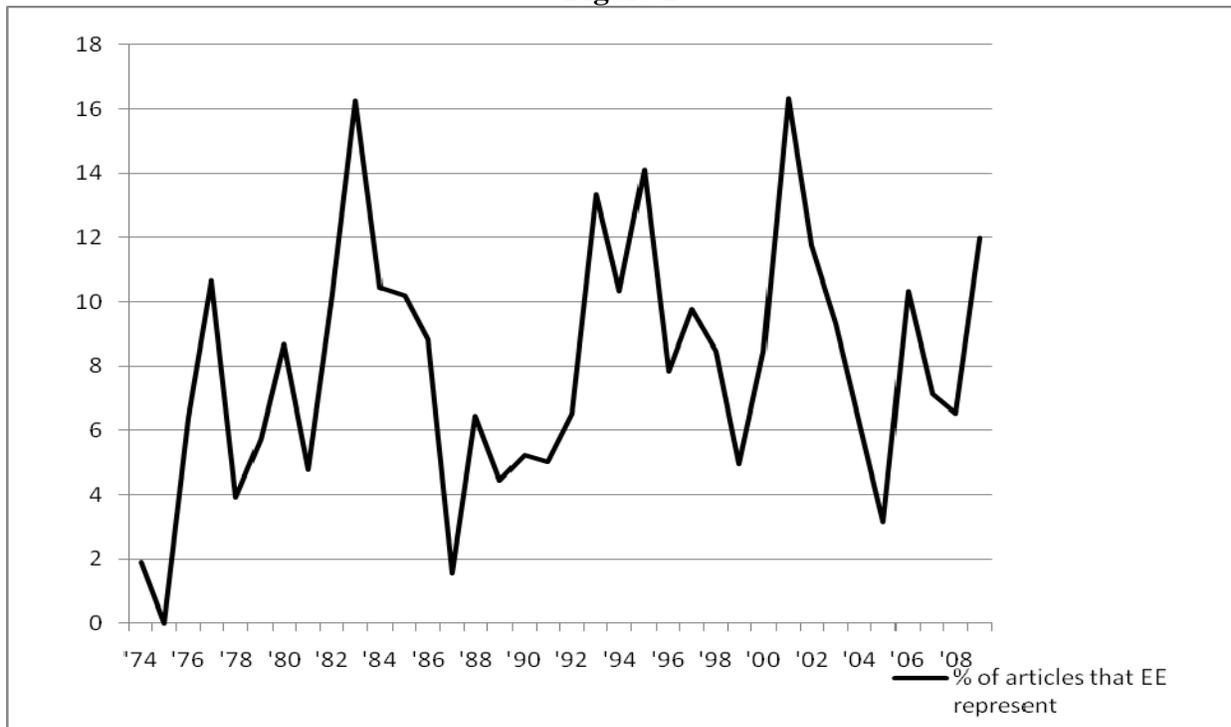
The figure shows that in 1990, the year in which the highest number of ABSEL articles were published, there was a total of 96 articles, while only five of these were EEs and 3 were QEEs for that year. In 1995, there were more EEs published than in any other year, with eleven, while the total number of articles was 87 for that year.

A second figure was generated to compare the number of EEs published expressed as a percentage of the total number of articles. This information is presented in Figure 2.

**Total Articles, EE Articles and QEE Articles**  
**Figure 1**



**EE Articles as a Percent of Total Articles Per Year**  
**Figure 2**



As can be seen, to the extent that interest can be expressed by percentage of articles, years 1983 and 2001 were years of peak interest with 16% of the articles that represent EEs in each of those years. With the exception of 1975 (ABSEL's second year) there has continuously been at least one article each year devoted to an EE. In terms of averages, the mean and median percentage of articles per year is 7.9 and 8, respectively. Clearly, EEs have been an important feature in the published ABSEL Proceedings albeit relatively small when expressed as a percentage.

As noted above, criterion 2 states that an exercise must address some type of theme, topic and/or learning goal(s). The authors reviewed all the EEs and, based on the experiential exercise authors' self-reported goal or goals, tracked these over the years. Table 1 shows the many topics listed by the experiential exercise authors. One of the problems of categorizing experiential exercises by theme or topic is that experiential exercise authors may list several topics or only one topic as the primary topic or theme of the experiential exercise. While this is their prerogative and may well represent what the exercise is attempting to address, our categorization schema lists all the principal topics or themes that were covered in the exercise. It turns out that 78% of all the experiential exercises listed more than one topic or theme as a major one.

The reader should note that a number of topics appeared four or fewer times in our compilations. For the sake of simplicity these were not included in Table. The topics which appeared four or fewer times listed

alphabetically include: careers, entrepreneurship, getting acquainted/networking, motivation, organization change, storytelling, and time/stress/meeting management. In their review the authors observed several articles on EEs for which the primary topic was simply unclear.

As can be seen in Table 1, the topics most frequently addressed by EEs are many of the traditional topics that are covered in organizational behavior and business strategy courses. It is perhaps a little surprising that many of the topics that the AACSB would include in the common body of knowledge and which are covered in business courses other than organizational behavior and business strategy, do not make the list. For example, typical marketing topics, finance topics, and quantitative analysis do not appear in the list. The authors infer from this that the typical ABSEL faculty member who developed an EE most likely would have found his/her teaching duties to include organizational behavior and business strategy and those ABSEL faculty members who teach in other areas have not focused their attention on EEs. Clearly ABSEL has many active members whose teaching focus is other than organizational behavior and business strategy. The fact that this subset of ABSEL scholars has not chosen to utilize experiential exercises and report the results in ABSEL proceedings is noteworthy.

Another important way to view experiential exercises is by activity utilized. For example, did the students take a test or inventory of some type and were debriefed as to the results, did the students engage in a role-play or did they

**Number of Citations by Topic of Exercise<sup>1</sup>**  
**Table 1**

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Number of citations</u>
Decision-making/problem-solving	33
HR tools and issues (incl. discrimination, ethics, interviewing, performance appraisal, job design, pay)	26
Negotiation/bargaining/competition	24
Teams, group dynamics, process	24 <sup>2</sup>
Perception/communication	23
Culture/diversity/international	19
Finance/accounting/math/economics/marketing	19
Creativity/critical thinking/discovery/knowledge/learning	15
Gathering and compilation of information	14
Leadership	12
Operations/quality/manufacturing	12
Exam review/debates/class competition	11
Power/organizational politics	7
Attitudes, incl. attitude change	6
MBO/goals/planning	6
Organization structure and design/fit	6
Conflict	5

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> 78 % of exercises cited more than one topic

<sup>2</sup> Many exercises use teams as a format for focusing on a topic, but only those exercises that actually focus on teamwork, group process or group dynamics are included under this category.

**Type of activity used in exercises<sup>1</sup>**  
**Table 2**

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Number of times used</u>
Do/make/assemble/build/draw/play game	52
Role play (incl. negotiation) <sup>2</sup>	47
Read/listen/view or watch (film, demonstration, modeling)	29
Develop a plan or a list/allocate/calculate/decide	26
Discuss (a case, a video, etc.)	26
Assess/rank/complete a survey	22
Other or unknown	8
Dilemma	3

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> A number of exercises employed more than one activity; these appear more than once in the table.

<sup>2</sup> The assumption is that almost all the role plays will have observers. If students are observing a demonstration, then the observation is tabulated in "Read..."

construct something, or did the students engage in multiple activities for a given EE? There are many types of student involvement in experiential exercises. The next table, Table 2 attempts to capture the major activities of the experiential exercises.

The reader will notice that the activity, do/make/assemble/build/draw, or the activity, role play, is

the primary activity in almost half of the EEs published in the ABSEL Proceedings. Four other activities appear less frequently. They include read/listen/view, develop a plan, discuss, or assess/rank/complete a survey.

In terms of authorship, many experiential exercises were solely-authored (approximately 53%) and many were developed by multiple authors (40% were duo-authored &

7% were authored by three or more authors). Rather than list the authors of each and every experiential exercise, it was felt that a more meaningful presentation would be to list authors who were significant contributors to EEs. To generate this list, an author was deemed to be significant if he/she met any of the following criteria:

- 1) was listed as the author of a solely-authored EE article;
- 2) was listed as one of two co-authors of an EE article; or
- 3) was listed as the lead author for an EE article with three or more co-authors.

In order to show the era of involvement from 1974 to 2009, the contributions of authors were grouped in six-year time frames. During the period 1974 to 2009, 147 different authors made at least one EE contribution to ABSEL Proceedings as defined above. Since it would have been excessive to show all their names, Table 3 presents the EE contributions for those authors that had three or more EE contributions during the period.

Table 3 shows that McAfee, Pittenger and Butler have been ABSEL's most prolific developers of EEs, with their contributions at twelve, eight and seven articles, respectively. Boscia and Mills have contributed five articles each, with Boscia's contribution occurring more recently, and Mills' contribution occurring earlier in ABSEL's history. If one looks at the records of the most prolific authors (defined as those authors with three or more EEs), a somewhat disturbing pattern appears to be emerging. In the six-year time periods from 1992 to 1997 and from 1998 to 2003 there were twenty-five total contributions by the most prolific EEs contributors. In the six-year period from 2004 to 2009, that number has fallen precipitously to eleven. There is a clear decline in the output of EEs by ABSEL's

most prolific EE developers. If this is a matter of concern, the solution may be to reinvigorate some of the "older" ABSEL scholars or to energize a new wave of ABSEL scholars to focus on the development and presentation of EEs.

Further evidence of a decline in the prominence of EEs shows up if one looks at the percentage of EE articles in comparison with the total articles published in the proceedings when the data is grouped in six-year time periods. Six-year time periods were used instead of annual periods to smooth out spikes and troughs that appear in the data when viewed using annual data. In the six-year time period, 1992 to 1997, 10% of all articles published in ABSEL proceedings were EEs. In the six-year time period, 1998 to 2003, the percentage of all articles that were EEs dropped to 9%, and in the time period 2004 to 2009, the percentage of articles that were EEs further dropped to 7%.

## THE PROTOTYPE

After reviewing 176 EEs and 100 QEEs, it became apparent that many EEs, as well as QEEs did not have a common format. Often, we had to read the articles about a particular experiential exercise several times to determine what the theme was, what the students actually did, or, even if it was truly an experiential exercise! On the other hand, several experiential exercises impressed us with their straightforward, precise and well-structured formats; for example, the exercises of Brenenstuhl, 1977; Halpin, 1999; Pittenger and Heimann, 2000; and McAfee and Boscia, 2004. In these exercises, it was clear what the experiential exercise was intended for, how it was to be used, how long

### Lead or Double Authored EE Contributions

**Table 3**

	'74-'79	'80-'85	'86-'91	'92-'97	'98-'03	'04-'09	Totals
McAfee	1	2		3	2	4	12
Pittenger				4	4		8
Butler		1	2	3	1		7
Boscia					2	3	5
Mills		1	4				5
Graf		3		1			4
Markulis				1	2	1	4
Oppenheimer		2			2		4
Potosky				1	2	1	4
Dennehy				2	1		3
Faltot		3					3
Heimann					3		3
Hunsaker, J.		1	1	1			3
Morgan				2	1		3
Neves			1	1		1	3
Roberto					3		3
Somers			1	2			3
Strang				1	1	1	3
Stratton				3			3
Woodside	1	1			1		3
Total per period	2	14	9	25	25	11	

it took, and what materials and pre-prep were required. From these exercises, the authors compiled a list of requirements for how exercises should be structured and formatted for future ABSEL conferences. They are as follows:

- purpose of the EE clearly spelled out at the outset;
- topic or subject matter (primary & secondary) clearly stated;
- approximate class time needed;
- pre-prep for students (do they need to read something, prepare for role-plays, etc.);
- pre-prep for instructor (special materials for exercise, reading or knowledge of specific topical areas, etc.);
- special materials needed (or suggested substitute materials);
- suggestions for debriefing (Markulis & Strang, 2003, Dennehy & Sims, 1993; McAfee, 1990); and
- response of students to their experience with the exercise.

## CONCLUSION

What can be gleaned from reviewing all these exercises? First, in the thirty-six years of ABSEL, there were 2,225 papers, articles, workshops, symposiums presented at ABSEL with 176 of these being experiential exercises, or 7.9% of the entire body of work. The number of exercises did not follow any particular pattern, although 1983, 1995 and 2002 represent the highest total as a percentage of total works published. From a thematic standpoint, the exercises encompassed approximately twenty-eight themes or topics, at least as classified by major topic or subject. There were more human resources-related exercises than any other category. Student involvement in exercises also covered a wide range of activities or ‘action learning.’ Many exercises had student co-authorship or involvement, although we did not tabulate this. In terms of authors, several authors were consistent in their development of exercises, while the total number of authors (including multiple authors) was almost as large as the number of experiential exercises published.

For those advocates of experiential exercises, there seems to be a disturbing trend in terms of the frequency or number of articles categorized as experiential exercises in recent years. Some of ABSEL's most prolific experiential exercise creators have not been as active recently, and the percent of articles which can be described as experiential exercises has shown indications of a decline in the past decade.

The present authors envision their second task as identifying the “best” experiential exercises from the ones published in the ABSEL Proceedings and publishing a stand-alone book of these experiential exercises, as well as additional ones collected from ABSEL members. We look forward to the ABSEL community in assisting us at determining selection criteria for these.

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