BEYOND TRADITION: EXPLORING THE QUALITIES OF EXPERIENTIAL INSTRUCTORS

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Full Paper
Experiential Track

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the qualities that distinguish experiential instructors from their more traditional counterparts. It proposes that differences can be found in relation to their preferred learning processes, the goal and content of learning, instructor characteristics, their degree of innovation and responsiveness to needs, their incorporation of reflective practices, and the potential for transformation through learning.

INTRODUCTION

The theory of experiential learning, first proposed by David Kolb and Ronald Fry (1974), and the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) are foundational elements of experiential education. Much has been written about it, and, indeed, a Google Scholar search of the term "experiential learning" yields over 5 million results. Along the same lines, much has been written about the role of the experiential instructor as a facilitator, guide, and mentor. However, surprisingly little has been written about the qualities of those who choose to employ experiential learning methods in their classrooms. In this paper, I propose that experiential instructors stand apart from their traditional counterparts through a unique set of qualities that redefines the learning process and empowers students to become active participants in their own learning. This paper outlines six characteristics that likely differentiate experiential instructors from traditional ones and explores how these qualities result in a more effective learning environment.

PRINCIPLES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Some principles of experiential education identified by the Association for Experiential Education, include:

- "Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments, and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the learner.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes."

BENEFITS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning, learning by doing, generally offers a superior form of learning in comparison with what is offered by the traditional lecture style of teaching where the instructor is the primary source of knowledge and students are passive recipients of that knowledge (Li, Huang, & Chen, 2018; Victorino, Ziad, & Quiroz, 2018). Here's a sampling of research that points to the benefits of experiential learning:

1. Higher levels of learner engagement, retention, and understanding of information. In a review of the relevant research, Prince (2004) concluded that, compared to traditional lectures, active learning, including experiential learning, resulted in higher levels of learner engagement and information retention and understanding.
2. Motivation and Interest. Research suggests that experiential learning stimulates learners to be actively engaged in the learning process and more intrinsically motivated to learn than their counterparts (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). As self-determination theory demonstrates, emphasizing intrinsic learning is more effective than the use of (traditional) extrinsic motivators (Guay, 2022).

3. Deep learning. Also, rather than the memorization associated with traditional lectures, experiential learning is associated with deep learning which, in turn significantly improves the retention and application of new knowledge (Marton & Säljö, 1976).
4. Collaborative learning. Collaborative learning which is inherent in experiential learning helps students develop their interpersonal and broader social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).
5. Practical skill development. Experiential learning inherently provides learners with opportunities to develop and practice new skills and critical thinking in real-world situations.

QUALITIES OF EXPERIENTIAL INSTRUCTORS

Despite the research and broader endorsement of the use of experiential learning methods, there has been insufficient investigation into the unique qualities displayed by those who embrace such approaches. Drawing on research findings, I posit that experiential instructors distinguish themselves from their traditional counterparts by embodying a distinct set of qualities that reshape the learning process and enable students to actively engage in their own education (see Table 1). More specifically, the following are six characteristics that likely set experiential instructors apart from their traditional counterparts:

1. Experiential instructors view learning differently. They emphasize meaning, depth, and broader life lessons beyond classroom boundaries. Their goal in developing learning experiences is to develop the entire person such as their life skills and critical thinking abilities (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). Genuine learning in experiential classrooms occurs through critical thinking, application, and reflection (Kolb, 1984). In this manner, their goal is transformative and impactful, engendering personal growth and societal change (Mezirow, 1991). Traditional instructors, on the other hand, tend to focus on covering the curriculum and simply teaching knowledge on subject matter content through the application of content delivery techniques, rather than on fostering broader impact. For them, information transfer is the priority, rather than fostering deep understanding.

2. Experiential instructors prioritize learning, rather than teaching. Experiential professors have a distinct view of learning that diverges from the traditional transmission model. In their pedagogical approach, experiential instructors value and emphasize the process of learning, rather than focusing on the act of teaching itself (as do their traditional colleagues). They understand that genuine learning involves critical thinking, application, and reflection (Kolb, 1984). The experiential approach emphasizes understanding, application, analysis, and engagement, all of which prioritize higher-level thinking skills associated with deeper learning and long-term retention and utility. In contrast, in their instructional design, traditional instructors tend to prioritize the content to be delivered (Freeman et al., 2014) and its transmission. They may reward rote memorization of concepts, focusing on the "remembering" and, possibly, "understanding" objectives of the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy, but rarely reaching or measuring higher-level thinking skills (Foo & Foo, 2022).

3. Experiential instructors are the 'guide on the side,' rather than 'the sage on the stage' (King, 1993). Experiential instructors adopt the role of a guide who facilitates active learning through hands-on learning experiences with an emphasis on drawing out learning from the participants (King, 1993). They do not place themselves at the front of the room and the center of the attention of learners. In contrast, their traditional counterparts often assume the role of the all-knowing "sage on the stage" and, thus, emphasize lectures and one-way communication. Moreover, student attention is centered on the all-knowing instructor who is at the front of the room.

4. Experiential instructors are learner-centered and humble. They embrace a learner-centered approach, understanding that learners have diverse backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles, all of which influence the learning process (Brookfield, 2017). Experiential instructors acknowledge that they and learners have something of value to learn from each other. They try to understand learners' current knowledge and skills as well as their needs and interests so that they can build on the former as a way of achieving the latter. The result is an inclusive and participative learning environment. In contrast, traditional teaching approaches can come across as being more ego-driven, given the inherent and central focus on instructors and the knowledge they have to transmit to students (as though the latter were empty vessels waiting to be filled).

5. Experiential instructors are innovative, creative, and reflective. Experiential instructors are innately innovative and creative in designing their learning experiences (Rust, 2002). They experiment with various experiences and other active learning approaches, incorporating technology, real-world applications, and interactive activities. They engage in continuous improvement by reflecting and building upon the success of the learning experiences they offer, constantly looking to further stimulate student engagement and learning. Their traditional colleagues are more likely to modify the content of their PowerPoint slides from year to year with an interest in being up to date rather than attempting to be creative in how they generate student learning.

Experiential instructors are highly emotionally intelligent and have a strong understanding of human dynamics. They are very likely to have a good understanding and well-developed skills in navigating the complexities of classroom interactions and emotions (Goleman, 1995). Moreover, they foster learning environments characterized by open communication, empathy, and mutual respect. Managing interpersonal relationships may well form part of the underlying lessons offered to learners in the active learning process. In contrast, interpersonal relationships and skills in managing them tend to be brushed aside in traditional classrooms whose focus is on learning the material.

TABLE 1
Experiential vs. Traditional Instructors

Experiential Instructors	Traditional Instructors
Emphasize meaning, deep understanding, and broader life lessons	Focus on covering the material in the curriculum (i.e., information transfer)
Build life skills and critical thinking abilities	Teach subject matter content (rather than its broader impact)
Encourage higher-level skills such as critical thinking, application, and reflection	Focus on the subject matter content to be delivered and its transmission
Have transformative goals that engender personal growth and societal change	Prioritize and focus on the act of teaching
Prioritize the process of learning	Reward rote memorization that focuses on remembering
Serve as the guide on the side who facilitates active learning and two-way communication and learning	See themselves as the all-knowing sage on the stage emphasizing lectures and one-way communication
Are inclusive, participative, and learner-centered (appreciative of their diverse backgrounds and ability to learn from each other)	Can be ego-driven, with a central focus on instructors and transmitting their knowledge to students (as though they were empty vessels waiting to be filled)
Are innovative, creative, and reflective in designing learning experiences	May focus on modifying their slides over time to ensure they're up to date
Highly emotionally intelligent and able to navigate the complexities of interactions and emotions	May focus on the intellectual material and brush aside interpersonal relationships and skills.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The foregoing suggests that experiential instructors are likely to embody qualities that distinguish them from their traditional counterparts. By prioritizing action learning, adopting a learner-centered approach, modeling humility, and embracing innovation, they create transformative learning environments and are likely to shape the future of learning. As education evolves toward more engaging and impactful approaches, all instructors should reflect on these qualities. Key questions to consider include:

1. How do I determine when someone has truly learned something? Is it when they can recite information transmitted to them, or when they can apply it? How important is developing critical thinking and life skills beyond the classroom? Do the limits of my responsibilities as an instructor lie with information transfer or contributing to creating societal change?
2. Where is my focus of attention: teaching or learning? What higher-level thinking skills, if any, are emphasized in my classroom?
3. Do I prefer to be the center of attention in my classroom, with all eyes and focus on me, the subject matter expert? Or am I able to share the 'stage' and build on existing knowledge in the classroom through multi-way communication with learners enabling them to learn from each other as well as through me?
4. Do I focus on communicating the subject matter in a non-participative, 'out of context' manner; i.e., without regard to students' pre-existing knowledge and experiences in the area? Or do I try to incorporate learners' existing understandings and interests in a participative manner? Do I acknowledge that I have lots to learn, potentially even from the learners?
5. Do I prefer to offer students the "standard learning experience" involving lecture-based presentations, possibly with the assistance of PowerPoint and other technology, rather than being willing to risk offering more innovative and creative learning experiences that are potentially less predictable in terms of their outcome?
6. Do I focus on a narrow definition of my topic area, sidestepping the development of interpersonal skills as learners work together to achieve course objectives?

These questions can be posed as part of a personal reflection process, potentially at the start of one's teaching career, with the answers noted in a teaching dossier. Moreover, these questions can be revisited regularly, serving as a mechanism for

continuously enhancing one's teaching capacities and depth. Additionally, they may form part of a faculty development retreat, providing instructors with the opportunity to contemplate their raison d'être for being educators.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Given the apparent dearth of research examining the differences between experiential and traditional lecture-based instructors, and the foregoing discussion pointing to potential divergences, I recommend conducting research to study their differences, particularly in the six noted areas.

An initial step would involve defining which instructors fall into each group: experiential instructors versus traditional lecture-based instructors. Instructors could be asked to self-identify accordingly. To avoid creating an 'unnatural' yes-no dichotomy (since some instructors may employ a combination of both pedagogical approaches), instructors could be asked to rate the extent to which they view themselves in this manner on a Likert scale. Also, it is important to note that one's stated preferences may not perfectly align with one's actions in the classroom. As such, it could be beneficial to review their teaching dossiers to assess how frequently they reference experiential learning.

Several potential research questions that could explore differences between these groups include:

1. Do experiential and traditional lecture-based instructors hold significantly different learning goals and perspectives on learning?
2. In comparison to their traditional lecture-based counterparts, do experiential instructors focus significantly more on the learning process and less on lecture-based transmission of material?
3. To what extent are experiential instructors more likely to play the role of facilitator or 'guide on the side,' rather than 'the sage on the stage'? And, are their traditional lecture-based counterparts more inclined to prefer the latter?
4. Are experiential instructors significantly more learner-centered and humble than their traditional lecture-based counterparts?
5. Are experiential instructors significantly more innovative, creative, and reflective than their traditional lecture-based counterparts?
6. Do experiential instructors possess higher levels of emotional intelligence and a stronger understanding of human dynamics than their traditional lecture-based counterparts?

Two studies, one quantitative and one qualitative, may serve as good starting points for answering these questions. A quantitative study, focusing on a comparative analysis of pedagogical approaches, would involve surveying a diverse sample of instructors from various academic disciplines. Participants would be asked to self-identify as either experiential or traditional lecture-based instructors and respond to Likert-scale questions aligned with each research question, using established measures where possible. Statistical tests, such as t-tests or ANOVAs, could be used to compare mean scores between experiential and lecture-based groups for each research question. As a variant of this design, if instructors are prompted to self-identify as experiential or traditional lecture-based instructors on a Likert scale, a regression analysis could be undertaken to identify the predictors of teaching style.

Concurrently, a qualitative study could explore the varying perspectives, providing a deeper understanding of the experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of experiential and traditional lecture-based instructors regarding the central elements of the research questions. Researchers would purposefully sample instructors with diverse experiences and backgrounds, including those who self-identify as either experiential or traditional lecture-based. The sample size would be contingent on achieving saturation, where additional participants become unnecessary as interview responses begin to significantly overlap. Researchers would conduct in-depth interviews with open-ended questions that explore teaching philosophies and perspectives combined with follow-up questions that delve into specific instructional methods, roles, and attitudes related to the research questions. Artifacts such as teaching dossiers, lesson plans, or reflections may offer further insights. Researchers would then undertake textual analyses of the qualitative data to identify recurring themes, triangulating these insights with findings obtained from examining artifacts.

When combined, these studies may offer a more complete understanding of the similarities and differences between experiential and traditional lecture-based instructors. These insights may offer valuable contributions to educational research and practice.

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