

THE INSTRUCTOR'S TOOLBOX: A MEANING-CENTERED FRAMEWORK FOR THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

A meaning-centered view of learning transactions suggests that a course can be viewed as a socially constructed conversation that spans several class meetings. When viewed from this perspective, the choices presented in an experiential toolbox to a skilled instructor take into account different kinds of communication goals associated with various experiential learning tools. Some tools serve the purpose of building or reinforcing content, other tools enhance how individual interactants (e.g., the instructor-carpenter and the student-materials) relate to each other, and still others may gauge how various aspects of the conversation are going.

INTRODUCTION

A good toolbox contains an assortment of tools and devices (e.g., a hammer, a drill, a staple gun, a wrench, pliers, screwdrivers, etc.) some fasteners and adhesives (e.g., nails, screws, nuts and bolts, staples, glue, etc.), and some measurement instruments or gauges (e.g., a tape measure, a level, a pressure gauge, a straight edge). And a good toolbox can just sit somewhere, waiting to be put to good use by someone who knows how and when to use each available tool.

ABSEL proceedings and other work in the Bernie Keys Library present a very large toolbox of games and pedagogical methods, but little guidance has been provided regarding how and when to use the tools available. Overall, the focus of ABSEL papers has been primarily on descriptions of specific experiential activities (i.e., a game, a case, a project) or simulations (i.e., "tools") which presumably enhance students' learning, and also on the results of an activity or pedagogical method in order to show that learning occurred. Relatively few papers have focused on the instructor (i.e., the carpenter or fix-it person) who uses a simulation or conducts an experiential activity in class (e.g., Chang, Choi, Chu, and Ng, 2004; Markulis, Malik, Howard, and Strang, 2003), although a few papers have provided some specific suggestions regarding techniques and "best practices" that facilitators can use (e.g., Markulis & Strang, 2003; Morgan, 1999). The student participants represent another rather infrequently examined part of the experiential system. Although students' learning styles and expectations have occasionally been addressed (e.g., Batista & Cornachione, Jr., 2005; Chang, Ng, Moon,

Yu, & Chan, 2005; Howard, Markulis, & Strang, 2000; Ledman, 2005), the relative qualities and individual differences of students who participate in experiential learning activities and simulations are often overlooked or presumed homogeneous and constant.

We know that an assortment of high quality tools and recommended techniques does not guarantee effective, creative construction or proper repairs. The specific materials to which a craftsman applies his tools as well as the skill and experience of the craftsman will have an impact on the resulting work. For example, we understand that we can't begin our work with a new material, shape it, staple it, glue it to other materials, and measure it on a Monday, and then start over with the same material on Wednesday. By Wednesday, the materials have changed. In addition, we know that one craftsman or artisan will perform differently from another, and may use the same tools in different ways.

The purpose of this paper is to describe experiential exercises within the overall context and experience of a course, and, in the process of doing so, present some recommendations for establishing an experiential framework for learning. A meaning-centered perspective regarding the communication that occurs during class meetings as well as a social constructionist view of the classroom experience provides a new framework for considering when and how to adopt and adapt experiential learning activities and tools to a specific course. First, the toolbox metaphor is further developed and various types of learning tools and pedagogical methods are organized and described. Second, a meaning-centered communication model and a social construction perspective are described in terms that relate to college classroom contexts. Third, a set of considerations for "using the tools," i.e., for developing a learning experience that follows the assumptions of the model are laid out. Some specific guidelines regarding what kinds of tools to use and how to use them at various points in the process of creating an experiential learning, meaning-centered course environment are provided.

ORGANIZING THE TOOLBOX

ABSEL has introduced many educational, engaging, and often entertaining experiential exercises to its members over the past several years, and many of these have been presented as tools that instructors can use to demonstrate certain ideas and help students understand complex subjects.

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That is, a tool has a purpose, sometimes narrow (e.g., most staple guns are used to staple), sometimes broad (e.g., a screwdriver is typically customized for its primary purpose in driving “Phillips head” or “flat” screws, but a flat tipped screwdriver might be used to pry open a paint can and the opposing end of a screwdriver could be used as a hammer). Examples of experiential exercises that similarly represent tools for business education include McAfee & Boscia’s (2004) exercise on allocating merit raises and Brozik and Zalpaska’s (2000) restaurant game. In these exercises, students are asked to make decisions related to a specific simulated circumstance or case, and doing so facilitates understanding of specific concepts.

Some instructional applications are less concerned with demonstrating specific concepts and transmitting knowledge content, but instead serve to enhance the classroom dynamic, that is, to “break the ice” or to encourage interaction. In other words, some experiential exercises are “fasteners” that encourage cohesiveness in student teams or that stimulate creative or critical thinking, which can be applied to a number of different topics. Some adhesives have broader application than others (e.g., glue versus plumber’s putty), and sometimes a specific tool must be used in concert with the fastener (e.g., staples aren’t much use without a stapler), but fasteners and adhesives clearly have a purpose that is categorically different from that of tools. Examples of experiential exercises or pedagogical methods that contribute to the dynamic of the interaction and hence fit well within this “fasteners” classification include Ettinger’s (2004) needle and thread activity designed to encourage the enactment of certain behaviors, Page and Donelan’s (2001) teambuilding 101 overview that calls attention to the team formation process, or Page and Mukherjee’s (1998) broader recommendations for applying seven principles to reduce student apathy and to encourage involvement.

A third category of things in a good toolbox refers to instruments and devices used to tell us what a problem might be or to tell us how we are doing while we are attempting to repair or to build something. In some cases, it is also possible to use these measurement instruments and gauges to evaluate the finished product of our efforts. Examples of pedagogical methods that represent measurement instruments or gauges include Hansen’s (2005) journaling technique; several methods of assessment were discussed and presented in a roundtable discussion by Pittenger et al. 2004.

MEANING-CENTERED COMMUNICATION

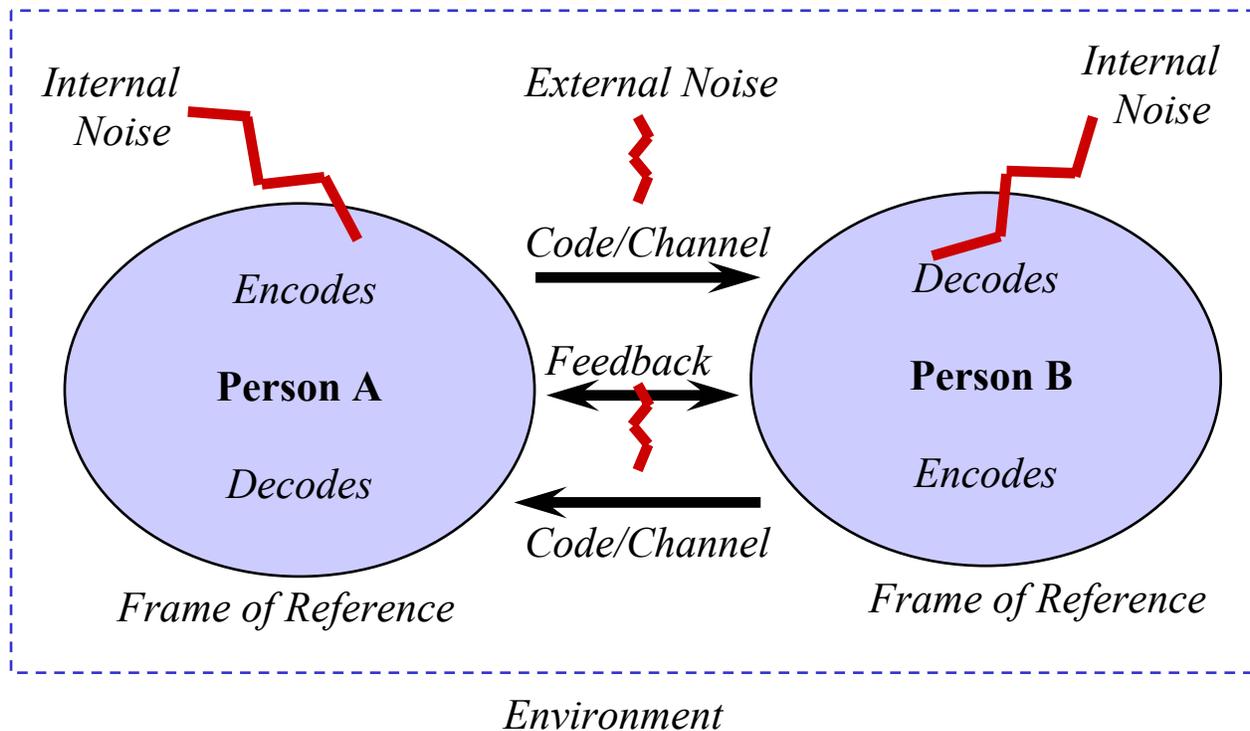
A college course is a communication event. There are several alternative perspectives on how this communication exchange occurs. A *transmission* view (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) of the communication event means that students are the receivers of an instructor’s actions and

messages. The focus of this perspective is on messages and channels used to deliver messages (Fairhurst, 2001; Fisher, 1978). It is easy to apply this perspective to an instructor in a course that relies upon a lecture format. The “sage” gets up on “stage” every other day or so and tells students what they need to know, and the students listen and maybe write it down. It is presumed that “messages” are passed from the instructor to students, and students might exchange information and ask questions in turn. Knowledge is passed around, or transmitted, and hopefully by the end of the term everyone has received enough of it to pass the course.

Advocates of the experiential learning format challenge the transmission view of communication when they claim that learning happens better when students are more engaged and when students can work with and experience the information in order to better understand it. Proponents of experiential learning may assume that information that is tried out and tried on is learned better and retained longer. But it is conceivable that some experiential learning instructors remain within the frame of a transmission view of communication even when conducting experiential learning exercises in a classroom. Changing the format for the exchange doesn’t necessarily change the nature of the exchange process. Depending in large part on the instructor’s communication perspective when conducting an experiential activity, students can remain “receivers of the action” with only fleeting engagement, achieved through interaction, in the learning process. For example, simulations and experiential activities can be modeled and scripted so that an instructor can lead students through a series of steps that move students from point A to point B. The activities are “done to” one group of students one semester, and to another group the next term. The instructor is the primary sender, and the students are still receivers of the information.

In contrast to the transmission view, a *meaning-centered* (Fairhurst, 2001) view of the learning process that occurs in a course also involves senders and receivers of messages exchanged through some format (or mode), but the meaning-centered view interprets these components of the communication event from a different perspective. From this perspective, communication is the creation and exchange of meaning, not messages or information. For example, one of the fundamental assumptions of the meaning-centered approach is that the message that matters most is the one that is received. An instructor who elects to lecture students needs to worry less about what to say or do and more about students’ frame(s) of reference and how students might listen and respond. Another important aspect of this model, which represents the transactional view of communication (cf., Adler & Towne, 1990; also Littlejohn, 1983; Schramm, 1954) is that communication is a continuous process in which participants (instructors and students) simultaneously send and received messages. Figure 1 depicts the essential elements of the meaning-centered communication model.

FIGURE 1: TRANSACTIONAL MODEL OF COMMUNICATION



Note: This figure was adapted from a communication model presented in C. Hamilton with C. Parker (2001) *Communicating for Results: A Guide for Business and the Professions* (6th ed.), Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, p. 4.

Although a detailed explanation of every component of this model is beyond the scope of this paper, the communication model shown in Figure 1 depicts sender-receivers within their frames of references in some context or environment in which internal and external noise may interfere with their exchange with each other. Messages are simultaneously encoded in channels and decoded by the interactants, and feedback between the two parties move frames of reference closer to each other. When an overlap between frames of reference is achieved, the creation and exchange of meaning occurs. This communication process makes learning possible.

An instructor who facilitates an experiential activity from a meaning-centered approach needs to attend to feedback during the exchange, and this means actively responding and engaging in the learning process. Every message within a transaction has both content (what is said) and relational (how the interactants relate to each other) components. Each time a specific experiential exercise is facilitated in a classroom, it is created anew with those involved in the interaction, defined as the whole course over the semester. Content, or knowledge may be transmitted, but it is also important to acknowledge the formation and development of relationships that are facilitated and reinforced by each exercise. Each person involved brings a unique perspective to each episode (class meeting), and it is

important to rely upon social norms for interaction as well as to negotiate new expectations during the episode.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

An entire course taught over one term or semester can be viewed as one communication event that develops over time, but that happens to be regularly interrupted. These interruptions occur for one or more days (in between class meeting times), after which the conversation episodes continue. The conversation is itself an experience, socially constructed by students and the instructor. Social construction of meaning espouses a dialogic view where meaning is co-constructed through talk (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivasta, 1995; Gergen, 1985). It is derived from theories regarding the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1967) and sensemaking in organizational contexts (Weick, 1995), which describe reality as perceived and negotiated through interaction.

Morgan and Dennehy (2002) provided ABSEL with some excellent examples of experiential activities that can help students understand the implications of the constructivist approach and the idea that “perception is reality.” In contrast to their work, the present paper extends the application of social construction theories to frame the entire course. The incorporation of a variety of experiential learning activities into the communication event (course) may enhance the overall course experience and facilitate

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learning and application of the course content. Experiential learning activities are never stand alone experiences, but occur within the context of the conversation at a point in time that is meaningful. The timing of an activity and the specific effects it can have on the developing conversation are important considerations when selecting an experiential tool. This point stands in contrast to the many experiential tools organized by topic rather than by timing or the effect that they have on students.

WHAT TOOLS TO USE AND WHEN TO USE THEM IN A CONVERSATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Timing is everything. Every conversation takes time to develop, and there are appropriate and inappropriate moments in every conversation to negotiate various goals. It may be necessary to avoid conducting a certain wonderfully informative activity because the timing is not right or because the students are not “ready” for it, even though the focal topic of the conversation matches the primary topic of the activity. Further, a given activity might be modified in ways that adapt it to the needs of the interactants and the constraints of the context. The topic of learner readiness and timing has been addressed in some previous work presented at ABSEL (e.g., Anderson & Lawton, 2003; Maddox, Forte, & Boozer, 2000), but none so far has considered this issue from a communication-constructivist framework. It would be useful to apply what is known about how conversations begin, develop, and end in order to establish some guidelines about what kind of tool, fastener, or device a meaning-centered instructor might select based upon the evolution and needs of the classroom group.

To recap, a meaning-centered, constructivist approach to communication focuses on the creation and exchange of meaning. Meaning is accomplished through both the content and the relational aspects of the exchange of ideas and messages. Early in a term, it is important to use experiential tools that are appropriate to the knowledge content of the course (e.g., introductory information), but it may be even more important to facilitate interaction that establishes desirable relationships between and among students and the instructor. For example, the first moments of a class are perhaps best suited to “fasteners” that emphasize how students should relate to each other rather than straightforward information (content) about the syllabus. Social norms get established quickly, and may be borrowed from students’ experience in a previous course. It can be a mistake to try to use experiential tools that attempt to “teach” specific concepts with a group of students who have not created any overlap in frames of reference in the context of the course. What is needed are exchanges that build common perceptions about what a course is like and how individuals should relate to each other.

On the other hand, students expect and need to learn new concepts during a course, and once group norms and a

desired social context has formed, the exigency for tools that demonstrate specific concepts and encourage application is high. A course conversation might begin with some basic fasteners that get people to “stick together” long enough to learn together. The learning may be facilitated by experiential tools focused on teaching concepts associated with topics outlined in the syllabus and course learning goals.

It may seem obvious that experiential tools that function primarily as measurement devices should be used once there is, in fact, something to measure. However, gauges or assessment methods may serve to create feedback loops within the communication process. Therefore, it may be good to select and incorporate such measurement tools throughout a course as checkpoints for both process and content-related aspects.

Relationships are maintained through interaction. It is insufficient to expect an “ice breaker” one the first day of class to sustain interaction from one class to the next throughout a semester. Therefore, it is a good idea to consider tools that re-establish relationship at the beginning of each communication episode (i.e., each class meeting). It is one thing to “pick up where we left off” in terms of a recap of content, but it is another to reconnect with a group or have a group reconnect with each other in order to continue a conversation that has been interrupted.

One way to integrate the above considerations is to plan the communication goals for a course alongside the topical tactical plan typically described in a course outline. For example, early in a term, relational goals may be paramount, whereas the second, third, and fourth class meetings may focus primarily on generating content. It may be good to consider measurement tools around mid-term, but it may also be useful to embed more gauges throughout a course in order to establish feedback loops that inform the process. Also, a skilled instructor will likely need to apply some additional fasteners to reconnect with students (or to connect students and student teams with each other) at key intervals throughout the term. One section or class of students may require the application of different fasteners and gauges than another section in order to end up in the same place at the end of the conversation near the end of the term.

CONCLUSION

The notion that instructors can simply choose some tools, fasteners, and devices from the toolbox and effectively apply them to his or her own classroom is convenient. This perspective implies that experiential exercises are stand alone tools, waiting somewhere to be “used” on students who represent a fairly standard set of materials to be “worked on.” Any skilled facilitator will do. The classroom circumstance is loosely defined by the discipline or topic addressed by the experiential tool, and most class meetings begin anew with little concern for what construction occurred in the previous class during a different experiential exercise.

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