

THE MISSING INGREDIENTS IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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PURPOSE

This workshop is intended to:

- Emphasize the need for inclusion of ALL the steps for a fully effective learning experience, when designing an experiential workshop for classroom use, even if the classroom is a step in a work-based learning program.
- Highlight those steps that are often neglected or even ignored in the design of a complete learning experience.
- Provide for exploration of the form that these steps might take, in various topic areas.
- Provide an opportunity for practical application of the design process.

RATIONALE

For many years it has been an implicit assumption that a complete learning experience includes the following five steps:

- Acquisition of new knowledge
- Demonstration of how that knowledge can be applied
- Application in a real or simulated environment
- Debriefing (post application reflection and analysis)
- Correction of misconceptions (possibly with a repeat of some or all of the preceding four steps)

The increasing complexity of learning for the post-industrial era, with its imperative for continuing learning, has heightened awareness of the need to create foundations (possibly neural receptors) which can help absorb and integrate new knowledge for better understanding and greater retention, prior to application.

At the same time, there has been a spectacular increase in learning techniques intended to create bridges between theories and their application. Where there were originally only case studies, then simulations, games, and role plays, there are now a number of comprehensive programs under various names such as Action Learning, Project-Based or Problem-Based Learning, and Work-Based Learning.

Many of these new approaches, and even many simulations and role plays, fail to develop adequate foundation for the application of valid theories and concepts. They therefore do not prepare the learner as effectively for coping with the complexities and ambiguities of the 'real' world, as is possible.

There is increasing need, beyond strengthening the demonstration and debriefing steps, for better foundations:

- to help absorb and integrate complex new knowledge
- to increase understanding, retention, and application

Such an enhanced foundation can be provided in:

- case studies
- simulations, games, and role plays and also in
- Action Learning
- Project-Based or Problem-Based Learning
- Work-Based Learning

The enhanced foundation can be provided:

1. Prior to application, by bridges between theories or concepts, and their application
2. During virtual and even during actual application, with reminders of the concepts to be applied.

ONE PROMISING APPROACH

In addition to strengthening the demonstration and debriefing steps, the following should be provided:

1. Prior to actual or virtual application, opportunities for multiple loops of:
 - reflection with preliminary analysis (whenever possible with a tentative relevant conceptual model and/or initial basic, self-developed, questions to remind of issues to consider), and
 - validation of the model and/or reminder questions, as much as possible with the aid of relevant theories and concepts from the literature
 - preliminary, tentative, mental application
2. During application:

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- reminders of either the model or the questions

Many issues may be involved in reflection, analysis, model/guideline development and preliminary mental application. Still, sharply honed appropriate thought habits can help learners gain full mastery of the process that will, later on, be very helpful in making decisions and developing plans almost as quickly as they would do without these steps.

First across the gulf we cast
Kite born threads, till lines are passed
And habit builds the bridge, at last.
John B. O'Reilly, A Builder's Lesson

EXAMPLE - SALES PRESENTATION

An example can illustrate the process. A model of a complete sales presentation that can be used, or modified by the user, for reflection prior to application consists of:

1. Steps in the presentation
2. Concepts/skills to apply during the presentation

Steps

- Opener
- Probing for customer needs
- Providing product/service explanation with emphasis on customer needs
- Determining objections
- Responding to objections, with emphasis on customer needs
- Recommending action
- Obtaining commitment

Concepts/Skills

- Active listening
- Eye contact
- Probing
- Empathy
- Analyzing customer statements

The model, (concepts and steps) should be reviewed when planning any specific presentation. They should also serve as reminders during the presentation, possibly in abbreviated form or in summary form.

An abbreviated reminder model for use during a presentation (appropriate for the needs of a specific representative) might consist of:

- explanation based on needs
- responding to objections, with emphasis on needs
- listening
- eye contact

If such a model is modified by the learners, based on what has previously been presented, prior to practical application, after some demonstration, it satisfies the need for reflection, possibly with a tentative, relevant conceptual model and/or initial basic, self-developed, questions to remind of issues to consider). At the same time there is an opportunity for validation of the model and/or reminder questions, as much as possible with the aid of relevant theories and concepts from the literature, if theories are relevant.

Learners can be provided at this stage, with a specific situation, and prior to role-play application, asked to develop a preliminary, tentative, mental presentation (possibly with written notes)

Then, during application, it could be possible to provide reminders of either the model or the questions. One technique that has been used is to have one member of the learning team hold a card with reminders in large letters (such as the abbreviated reminder model described above), for the learner in the role play to see. The learner holding the card, or another one can then point to specific words to remind of steps or concepts which the role player is neglecting.

In the workshop, there are two activities, the first one prior to explanation of a management/leadership model, and a second one after that explanation.

Instruction for the first activity are given below.

ACTIVITY 1 - APPLYING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE ENHANCEMENT STEPS

As a team, decide on the enhancement steps for a simple learning experience, and develop:

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1. The tentative relevant conceptual model and/or initial basic, questions which a learner might develop (to remind of issues to consider), that would be appropriate for reflection, and validation PRIOR to practical application
2. A short list of reminders to keep in mind **during** application which would help to ensure that all the concepts and steps that are needed for thoroughly competent application are indeed applied.

An initial list of leadership decision considerations*

In preparation for the second activity, the issues which effective leaders would consider are provided.

1. Goals for the organization or organizational unit:
 - vision
 - direction
 - priorities
 - understanding of accountability
2. Appropriate participation - who, when and how.
3. Communications with stakeholders, individually and in groups
4. Coordination and cooperation
 - policies and procedures
 - anticipating, preventing, and managing potentially damaging conflict
5. Competence of all stakeholders
 - selection
 - competence development
 - use of competence strengths
6. Rewards
 - intangible
 - tangible
 - for spectacular contributions of employees
 - for non-spectacular contributions of employees
 - for other stakeholders

*This list is based on Rausch, Erwin and Washbush, John B., 1998, High Quality Leadership: Practical Guidelines to Becoming a More Effective Manager. ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI

Instructions for the second activity, which followed the explanation of leadership issues are given below.

ACTIVITY 2 - DESIGNING A COMPLETE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

As a team, develop a complete learning experience, **as far as possible within this workshop**, either for the management/ leadership decision considerations as given above or as modified by the team, or for a topic of the team's choice (the topic from Activity 1 may be appropriate). Include what should be covered in each of the following steps:

- Acquisition of new knowledge
- Demonstration of how that knowledge can be applied
- The tentative relevant conceptual model and/or initial basic questions which learners should develop to remind them of issues to consider (that would be appropriate for reflection, and validation PRIOR to practical application)
- The short list of reminders to keep in mind **during** application which would help to ensure that all the concepts and steps that are needed for thoroughly competent application are indeed applied
- Appropriate application in a real or simulated environment

The next steps cannot be planned since they depend on what happens during the application steps. However, some thought could be given to what should be stressed during:

- Debriefing (post application reflection and analysis)
- Correction of misconceptions (possibly with a repeat of some or all of the preceding four steps)

CONCLUSIONS

Expanding the definition of a complete learning experience by ensuring that learners develop adequate conceptual foundation prior to actual or virtual application of new learning, and reminders during initial practical application can significantly enhance the transfer of learning to its intended use. This is especially important in Action Learning, Project-Based or Problem-Based Learning, and Work-Based Learning, where learners are often thrust directly into application, sometimes even with little more than a review of theories, often without any bridges to their application in practical use.