

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO PROBLEMS IN UTILIZING EXPERIENTIAL TECHNIQUES

Daniel C. Brenenstuhl, Arizona State University

ABSTRACT

Experiential learning has been widely heralded as an innovative and effective approach to learning. That is not to say that experiential learning has no problems or critics. Individual facilitators who choose to utilize experiential techniques will encounter a number of critics and a number of problems to resolve. Interestingly enough, our own students/trainees may well be critical of the process as well as our peers in academia. We must address our attention to these issues if we are to expect experiential learning to advance past its present state.

INTRODUCTION

This panel will identify some of the major problem areas that the participants have encountered in their own usage of experiential techniques. We will begin with the often overlooked problem concerning the Cost-Benefit relationship that a user (instructor) should be cognizant of before deciding to implement an experiential technique. Once the instructor has decided that the benefits exceed the costs involved, the next major problem area concerns formation of participant teams. Participants should be properly motivated to derive the maximum value from any experiential technique. This problem area is often underestimated by new users of experiential learning. The final problem area we will address deals with proper feedback to the participants. An innovative approach to the feedback issue will be discussed.

Cost-Benefit Relationship

A cost-benefit analysis should be considered by every user of experiential techniques. The analysis should be undertaken from the point of view of the instructor. Potential costs include additional preparation time during the start up phase of the project: heavy demands on the normal system for computer time, secretarial time, etc; students not appreciating the demands upon the user: peers not appreciating the demands upon the user: potential risk of poor evaluations by students if all does not go well. The benefits include the stimulation of utilizing an innovative approach to teaching; intrinsic satisfaction from a successful application of the technique; better student evaluations if all goes well; increased status for the user if the user is seen as expanding the frontiers of knowledge.

Team Formation

Several possibilities exist for the formation of participant teams. It seems that a balanced approach is most equitable to

all concerned. The difficulty in developing a balanced approach to team formation is the necessity for the user to develop a set of criteria to evaluate the equality of the resultant teams. Some possible criteria to consider would be: major, grade point average, past experience with experiential techniques, student's available free time, student's home address (to facilitate off campus meetings), and number of hours of employment.

Motivating Participants

Several approaches have been suggested to boost participant motivation. One of these is to allow the participants active involvement in developing the experiential technique. Grading that seems more related to chance than to performance is sure to reduce motivation. The user would be wise to insure equitable grading and to use peer evaluations to determine intra-team grade distributions. Another approach that would be relatively easy to implement would involve the instructor with the usage of as much psychological support as possible. This psychological support seems to be especially important during the critical start up period when many participants are suffering from information overload and battling an unfavorable leaning curve.

Performance Feedback

Debriefing and performance feedback are necessary for participants to fully appreciate many experiential techniques. One innovative approach to performance feedback is the application of videotape to an experiential technique. The advantages of videotape for feedback include: the possibility of repeated viewing of the tape for a thorough self evaluation; the fact that the participant is actually seeing their own behavior with their own eyes; and that participants can be exposed to other participants who have performed effectively with these participants serving as models for appropriate behavior.

These four areas are by no means the only problems that a user might encounter while applying experiential techniques, but they do represent a sampling of the major problems that one might expect to face.