

**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: IF IT FEELS GOOD, DO IT!**

James W. Schreier, Lakeshore Group, Ltd.

At a roundtable discussion on the "Evaluation of Experiential Learning Problems," I suspect that some generation of conflict is as valuable as a scholarly treatise on the various forms of evaluation, or a description of some evaluation process which may or may not be particularly relevant to the audience. Faced with a desire to discuss, even argue about, some of the critical questions concerning the evaluation of experiential learning, I started where most others have started, the two previous Proceedings from ABSEL.

There I found several papers discussing the need for evaluation, several papers presenting evaluation studies for various simulations and even some attempts to formalize an evaluation process. I was instantly struck with one major question: why do we evaluate experiential learning efforts? Is it for our own benefit, that is, are most of us conducting evaluation efforts as part of a promotion for our own simulations? Or: Are we evaluating the efforts because we need to justify the use of the materials to other people, for example the students or the administration.

The evaluation of experiential learning and simulations is conducted for many reasons, including most of those suggested. This is certainly important, as many others have reported, if experiential learning is going to achieve the acceptance of other techniques. But, exactly what is being evaluated and what are we trying to accomplish with these evaluations?

I wonder, sometimes, as I evaluate my own simulation, if there are not several mistakes being made in the area of evaluation. I read the evaluation materials with care--and concern. Many of the experiential learning materials are evaluated by their author, using a treatment-control group model. Two sections of the class are tested, using the same testing materials, with one using the experiential or simulation materials and the other a more traditional lecture-discussion approach. But this raises a serious question. Are the scores on a test the criteria that should be measured? It seems to me that we are working with a much more important criteria which might generally be labeled knowledge of an area, for example, management, or an ability to perform, at some later date, on the job. And, because of years of previous experience, a model has been formulated which says that performance on a paper and pencil test, one which measures the recall of certain facts and/or relationships, is a valid predictor of that criteria.

## Computer Simulation and Learning Theory, Volume 3, 1976

The field of personnel management has been assaulted in the last few years by the requirements of the equal employment laws to validate, on a criterion basis, any tests used in an employment process which may tend to discriminate on the basis of sex, race, age, etc. Yet, while many college instructors understand the principles of test construction, I find that very few ever take the time, even if it was available, to validate tests.

When we take a stand that a course is better, or worse, based on such a long series of relationships, it is possible that we are attempting to justify our efforts in a way that is not, in itself, justifiable. The logic seems faulty when we attempt to prove the usefulness of an experiential technique because people score better on a test which can be shown to discriminate between good and bad students of a subject. This conclusion does not, necessarily, follow!

Another area of concern is that most evaluations are conducted by the author of the simulation or experiential learning effort. When the author uses his or her material, it seems logical that the effort put into the course, into explaining the material, and the natural enthusiasm shown are different than someone else who might decide to use the material. It is not surprising when most of these evaluations come back with a large number of the respondents saying that "it was a great experience" or "I learned a lot more than I did in other courses."

Still another point can be made for the evaluation of materials. If the author of the materials evaluated his or her efforts, it is based on the belief and commitment to the materials developed. If I did not believe, based on my own experiences, that the material developed did not do a better job than other approaches, I would not use it.

And what of the teacher attempting to evaluate experiential materials which are promoted and sent to him from various sources. Does this person evaluate each possible set of materials by conducting an experimental/control group test or does he rely on the published information? Those of us concerned with the development and evaluation of simulation and experiential learning materials know of the books, articles, and conferences on evaluation. What about the teacher who is intrigued with the idea of experiential learning?

I strongly suspect that each professor throughout the world is constantly evaluating both his or her own teaching performance and the materials selected for different courses. All teachers have an Inner evaluation system based on their knowledge of teaching/learning theories, articles which they've read, classes attended, knowledge of different approaches, and experience. When faced with a teaching assignment where experiential techniques might be used, this inner evaluation system is capable of dealing with the many variables involved: team size, class size, complex-

## **Computer Simulation and Learning Theory, Volume 3, 1976**

ity of the decision factors, time needed for preparation, computer availability, etc.

It is certain that the evaluation of experiential learning is critical today and it will remain critical in the future. I believe that a clearer focus on the objectives of experiential learning is essential. If the goals of an exercise are to give participants experience in dealing with leadership problems, the success cannot be measured by how well they answer questions about leadership theory. The success is measured by the simple experience of the participants: did they have to deal with a leadership process? If the goal is to make them better leaders when they arrive in the business world, then we need to conduct criterion based studies on the validity of the materials.

The questions of evaluation must be asked and it is the serious responsibility of associations like ABSEL to continue asking the questions--and hopefully, finding some answers. But I suggest to you that we may be looking in the wrong direction. Maybe we need to start from the position of many professors who use experiential techniques because "they feel good."