

A TRIADIC MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO ENHANCING THE EFFICACY OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

ABSEL scholars have been on a perpetual quest for ways to enhance simulation and experiential learning since 1974. Numerous techniques and perspectives have been tested and evaluated in order to achieve better implementation of simulation and experiential pedagogies. This paper, after a brief review of selected efforts by ABSEL scholars over the last three years, takes the position that a multi-disciplinary approach may now prove fruitful to not only integrate the diversity and variety of ABSEL scholarship, but also to move the field forward on a more inclusive and integrative basis. As a suggested step in this process, a triadic multi-disciplinary approach is introduced combining perspectives of: 1) educational processes as discourse (derived from the literature of qualitative research), 2) the dynamics of the state(s) of liminality (derived from the literature of sociology), and, 3) epideictic rhetoric (derived from the literature of rhetorical perspective). The paper concludes with suggestions for application and further model building.

INTRODUCTION

ABSEL scholars have been on a perpetual quest for ways to enhance simulation and experiential learning since 1974. The multiplicity and variety of ABSEL research papers and conceptual schemes, over these many years, is awe inspiring to behold. ABSEL scholars continue this quest through ABSEL 2009, and will do so for many years to come. There is no doubt that the Bernie Keys Library is a massive collection of significant work.

However, ABSEL scholars continue to ask questions as to the level of ABSEL scholarship accomplishments. In 2006, Howard, Markulis, Strang and Wixon (2006) asked the question “Simulations and experiential exercises- Do they result in learning? Have we figured it out yet?” In 2007, Gentry and McGinnis (2007) asked the question “Does experiential teaching lead to experiential learning?” In 2008, Hoover, commenting on his observations of ABSEL after a 25-year hiatus, made a pair of informative observations in this regard. Referring to the beginning of ABSEL in 1974, he states “The ABSEL papers were all about exploring and expanding the effectiveness of our ability to design and deliver more effective learning experiences for students” (Hoover, 2008,p.86). Commenting on the current state of ABSEL, Hoover states, “I am delighted to discover, after a 25-year absence, we are still coming up with fresh perspectives, and that ABSEL researchers are still exploring new research paradigms” (Hoover, 2008, p.87).

The questions and observations raised by Howard, et al, Gentry, McGinnis and Hoover, asked over the last three years,

address and comment on useful areas of inquiry. However, one element is missing in the three papers cited. None conclude with or point to an integrative model that can be used as a consistently applicable framework for assessing ABSEL scholarship past, present or future; thus, the search continues. This paper is a modest attempt to address this shortfall, and proposes a triadic model based on three fields of intellectual inquiry that have not been examined from an experiential learning perspective. A selective sampling of ABSEL scholarship will be examined to reinforce the concept of the variety and innovativeness of current scholarship. The three triadic elements will then be examined in turn, these being: 1) education as discourse, 2) liminality, and 3) epideictic rhetoric. The paper concludes with an integrative model of the triadic elements and suggestions for the model’s application to ABSEL scholarship.

A SAMPLING OF ABSEL LITERATURE: 2006 to 2008

The accumulation of ABSEL scholarship represents a truly amazing collection of quality work, both in variety and in scope. However, in the service of recent works and to simplify the presentation, only selected papers from the last three years (the Bernie Keys Library Volumes 33, 34 and 35) will be used to illustrate the diversity and innovativeness of ABSEL scholarship.

2006. Howard, et al (2006), previously cited, found that papers appearing in the first 15 years of ABSEL did not differ significantly from ABSEL during the following 15 years. Nonetheless, the variety of the approaches found in Volume 33 is striking. Potosky (2006) viewed a course as a socially constructed conversation that spans several class meetings in her call for a “meaning centered framework.” Gentry, et al (2006) introduced the concept of “learned helplessness” as a consequence of game play that produces “dismal outcomes for students with performance orientation” (2006, p.4). Whitely (2006) waxed more philosophical, calling for applications of the Socratic Method and Bloom’s Taxonomy, while Gosen and Werner (2006) advocated a more direct approach to teaching business ethics.

2007. Gentry and McGinnis (2007) examined the question of whether or not experiential teaching leads to experiential learning. The application of “means-ends theory” was explored by Anistal and Cadotte (2007). Maddox (2007) sought to assess and incentivize learner contribution and performance excellence through the practice of reinforcing high motivation, performance and achievement in his classes, while Hoover (2007) sought to explore the spiritual dimension of experiential learning.

2008. Hoover (2008) sought to answer the Gentry and McGinnis question from 2007 by espousing the use of assessment centers in teaching behavioral skills. Maddox (2008) outlined the benefits of applying a “force-field research framework” to the teaching of creativity, while Gentry and McGinnis (2008) continued to focus on the challenges inherent in motivating students experientially. In a similar vein, Anderson, Lawton and Wellington (2008) focused on the relationship between goal orientation and simulation performance. Finally, Boscia and Turner (2008) examined the benefits of linking team covenants to peer assessment of simulation and experiential performance.

All of these papers, despite their variance in area of adoption and in application of pedagogy/technique, have one thing in common. All are dedicated to producing better implementation of simulation and experiential pedagogies to the benefit of student learning. What they lack in common is: 1) a shared vocabulary, 2) a universally applicable framework for “apples to apples” comparisons, and 3) a mechanism for evaluating if their applications are tracking successfully or unsuccessfully as they are in the process of implementation. After introducing three disparate perspectives from the literatures of qualitative research, sociology and rhetoric, this paper will outline a modest proposal that could possibly begin to address these three shortfalls.

PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION AS DISCOURSE

Processes of education and learning necessarily involve meaning making. A person cannot learn something that he or she is not capable of comprehending or does not understand. As Bishop (2005) states, “In order to construct meaning, it is necessary to appreciate how meaning is grounded in, and constructed through discourse” (2005, p. 125). Ryan (1999) puts it another way: “Meaning is constructed in the dialogue between individuals and the images and symbols they perceive” (1999, p. 11). In the educational settings of interest to ABSEL scholars, the players in the dialogue of this discourse are the instructor and the student. In this regard, I am taking the position that education (from the instructor’s perspective) and learning (from the student’s perspective) does not occur unless instructors and students work together to arrive at meanings they both understand and constructively share.

Many scholars describe discourse as representing meaning. I agree with that point of view, but I am also taking the position that discourse creates meaning. As such, discourse represents, points to and refers to things, but discourse can also create the things themselves (ideas, concepts, the meaning of experience, etc.). Discourse can be used to build particularly strong representations because “organizational narratives capture organizational life in a way that no compilation of facts ever can; this is because they are carriers of life itself, not just ‘reports’ on it” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 21).

The result of extended discourse between instructor and student is that it makes actions meaningful as shared experiences, a key component of experiential learning. I believe this is reflected in Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking, and I feel that this is the path Potosky (2006) was on with her concept of “socially constructed conversations.” This is a crucial point to

address for increasing the efficacy of experiential learning because meaningful discourse does not simply mirror social reality, it creates it (Hardy, Palmer & Phillips, 2000), working as “a structuring, constituting force, directly implying or tightly framing subjectivity, practice and meaning” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1145). Discourse both evokes and invokes reality (Hansen, 2006).

To summarize, I feel that it is vital to look at education as discourse, and for that discourse to function such that instructors and students are not only generating narratives of shared meaning, but also creating mutually generated learning outcomes. The role of the instructor, communicated using education as discourse, is to organize the learning environment and to put all of the pieces in place for the best possible learning outcomes. As Boscia and Turner (2008) observe, “Students by themselves do not naturally develop constructive interaction patterns” (2008, p. 1). The student’s role is to take the meaning distilled from the discourse and to convert it to learning outcomes. If the student does not perform this role, then the lasting change generated in a liminal state (see discussion below) cannot take place. Thus, education as discourse is a necessary but not sufficient condition for meaningful learning/change under conditions of liminality.

Kurt Lewin (1951) emphasized the importance of unfreezing in a learning episode as the first step in the learning process and as precedent to change. However, how can a student, as a potential learner, unfreeze relative to a point of view he or she does not understand or does not agree with? Education as discourse is not the process of unfreezing, but it is the process that lays down the foundational elements for the potential learning person to make (or not to make) the decision to unfreeze (or enter a state of liminal separation). The absence of education as discourse thus can create an environment where the student may be precluded from experiencing the opportunities for learning and lasting change that can be found in conditions of liminality.

PERSPECTIVES ON LIMINALITY

The field of sociology uses the concept of liminality as a lens of analysis in order to understand processes of individual transformation and change. Liminality theory was developed by Victor Turner (1969 and 1974), and is based on Van Gennep’s (1960) studies of rites of passage in African tribes. The theory points out a three-phased process consisting of separation from the normal world (or existing condition) into a world of existing on the margin (limen) or in a “space between.” The process is concluded when the new initiate returns to the normal world in possession of the experiential knowledge attained during the liminal state and incorporates their new state of being into the ongoing social order. Turner describes the liminal state as a threshold of sorts, a “no-man’s-land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural future” (Turner, 1980, p. 10).

Turner (1986) describes three phases of change through these types of reflexive performances: a *separation* from the established order, a *transitional margin* or ambiguous “social limbo” that creates a liminal space, and *reincorporation* into the social order. At first glance, the three liminal stages of separation, transitional margin and reincorporation appear to replicate Lewin’s (1951) model of unfreezing, changing and

refreezing. However, there are real differences between the two models, and although the distinctions may be subtle, there are nonetheless significant.

For example, separation is a more powerful concept than unfreezing because of the level and magnitude of commitment that is associated with separation. A potential learner could make the decision to unfreeze, but also be in a “just checking it out” mindset. Then if the learning experience becomes uncomfortable (as many intense and emotionally intrusive experiential learning experiences can be), the person can easily retreat to the previous state of being/state of comfort and negate the learning process. On the other hand, separation entails leaving the previous state of being behind. It is not a step into a tentative or conditional level of commitment; rather, it is a transitional step that leaves the established order behind.

Armed with a separation level of commitment, the learning person then enters into the “twixt and between” state of liminality wherein they are able to cross a threshold into a new way of being. In this context, processes of experiential education can be viewed as performances in a liminal space, a space where new roles can be identified and internalized. During performances in liminal spaces, thinking becomes reflexive, arousing a consciousness of our consciousness so that the whole spectrum of social roles and our social world can be reconsidered (Turner, 1980). Tempest (2004) takes the position that liminality can be extended to include not only individual change, but also organizational change. As such, she states that “By extending liminality to the concept of learning....this not only challenges the concept of organization as an enduring social artifact, but also raises issues about how learning and knowledge development takes place (as) the old limits of organization are being redefined while new ways of organizing are throwing up their own learning challenges” (Tempest, 2004, p. 507).

The final liminality change phase involves the process of reincorporating the new self (or new organization) into the existing social order. It is interesting to note that this is one of the areas where experiential learning has had potential shortcomings. What happens to our students when they leave the “no real consequences”/safe zone that is the experiential exercise or classroom? If they do carry some form of enhanced skills with them as a consequence of their experiential learning episodes, are they able to apply those skills outside of the classroom? Are those skills exercisable at will? Do those skills endure over time or fade away? We are not able to answer many of these questions, perhaps because we have been using models of experiential education where the supposed refreezing is based on self-report, is simply assumed to have occurred, or is not being measured in a meaningful sense. Roberts (2006), in an interesting case study of Native American powwow rhetoric, concludes that this challenge can be met, at least in part, by applying epideictic rhetoric to validate authority of the “new self” as well as constructing lasting value.

PERSPECTIVES ON EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

Aristotle was famous for his capacities of classification. In his writings in *Rhetoric* (trans. 1991), Aristotle divided oratory into three categories based on the purpose of the rhetoric and the audience; the three rhetorical classifications are deliberative, forensic and epideictic. Deliberative rhetoric is focused on the

future and is directed towards determining the efficacy of a proposed course of action. On the other hand, forensic rhetoric is focused on the past and is dedicated to defending or accusing someone and/or past behaviors. Epideictic rhetoric, our area of interest, focuses on the present. Sullivan (1994) describes it thusly: “Epideictic praises or blames someone (or some idea) ... and depends on heightening or amplification, leading to idealization” (Sullivan, 1994, p. 72).

The characteristics of “heightening and amplification” point out the power of epideictic rhetoric. The pathways leading to “idealization” highlight the value of epideictic rhetoric for processes of education and personal transformation. Ochs (1995) describes epideictic rhetoric as “the discourse of praise” and comments on the potentialities of epideictic rhetoric: “As educators, (we) need to be more aware of the raw power, the energy to constrain and change, held by epideictic” (Ochs, 1995, p. 2). It is also important to align our words as experiential educators with our deeds (Sheard, 1996). I would add that this would also entail experiential educators modeling desired end behaviors as well as proposing them as beneficial.

An experiential educator, acting from the perspective of education as discourse, can use epideictic rhetoric to produce rhetorical acts of condemnation/negative assessment or praise (Sullivan, 1994). This allows the instructor to guide a shared journey of teaching and modeling appropriate to professional practices as well as instilling in the student “sentiments or emotions considered appropriate within the orthodoxy which the teacher represents” (Sullivan, 1994, p. 71). As Duffy says, “Unlike deliberative and forensic discourse, which have limited practical purposes in view, epideictic must fulfill a broad and timeless educational function” (Duffy, 1993, p. 86). In other words, using epideictic rhetoric, the instructor moves away from the role of passive or impartial observer and thus ventures into avenues of educational interaction that are participative and caring, and that are characterized by advocacy.

As a final mechanism to illuminate the potentialities of epideictic rhetoric, I will put forth Sullivan’s 1991 model of the five functions of epideictic rhetoric, then re-order, and modify it in order to apply it to increasing the potential efficacy of experiential learning. The five rhetorical functions are: 1) education, 2) legitimization, 3) demonstration, 4) celebration, and 5) criticism (Sullivan, 1991). My modified model has six functions instead of Sullivan’s five (it begins and ends with evaluation/“criticism”), and is presented here as a stepwise six-stage model. I am taking the position that the successful application of this six-stage model would improve the efficacy of experiential learning.

Stage One--- I re-label from “criticism” to “learning need(s) identified”, i.e. criticism of the status quo; for an example of this concept, see Gentry and McGinnis (2008) and their use of the concept of the “curiosity gap” problem in experiential learning. Stage Two--- I re-label from “education” to “whole person experiential education”; for an example of this concept, see Hoover (2007) on the integration of the intellectual, emotional and behavioral dimensions of experiential learning. Stage Three--- I retain the label “demonstration” ; for an example of this concept, see Gosen and Werner (2006) on the “direct approach” to teaching business ethics. In addition, I also point out the benefits of combining direct experiential learning and vicarious experiential learning for demonstration purposes. Stage Four--- I retain the label “legitimization”; for an example of this concept,

see Boscia and Turner and their use of the verification that is afforded using “team covenants.” Stage Five--- I re-label from “celebration” to “reinforcement and positive feedback”; for an example of this concept, see Maddox (2006) on “incentivizing learner contributions.” Stage Six--- I add a sixth stage to this model with the descriptive phrase “environmental testing”. Examples of this concept would be found in the answers to the several questions posed earlier as to what happens after the reincorporation dynamics of liminality.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION: WHAT IF?.....AFTER 35 YEARS

I view the concepts of education as discourse, liminality and epideictic rhetoric as a triadic multi-disciplinary model that can be used to increase the efficacy of experiential learning. Education as discourse puts the relationship between instructor and student into a dynamic framework of shared meaning making. This allows the student to make a decision that is consciously self-serving for learning and personal growth, is based on information that is believed to be valid and useful, and is of sufficient magnitude and strength to enter and sustain the learning person through the three liminal stages of separation, transformation in the limin, and reincorporation. As Ianetta (2004) observes, such a state of affairs has the capacity to change learning environments (including experiential learning) from places of potential alienation and learner apathy to settings characterized by creation and transformation. As a final integrative perspective, I should also note that I see the three liminal stages and the six stages of epideictic rhetoric as outlined above functioning as an overlaid matrix. This allows the power of epideictic rhetoric to: 1) track progress, 2) reinforce progress, and 3) cement accomplishments at each of the three liminal stages. I will conclude the presentation of this triadic multi-disciplinary model by speculating what would have happened by now if ABSEL scholars had adopted these three models 35 years ago at ABSEL’s inception.

EDUCATION AS DISCOURSE

ABSEL scholarship can be viewed through the lens of the relationship between the instructor and the student. This can be framed in a more direct fashion through the lens of the instructor/student relationship in the implementation of experiential exercises, simulations and/or pedagogical applications designed to facilitate student learning. Or, it can be framed in an indirect fashion in the design of learning systems intended to produce student learning. What these applications have in common is the orientation that the student is a customer of sorts and we are providing products and services, hopeful of making a sale. In this orientation, the experiential/simulation practitioner is the controlling agent of change, and the student plays the role of the reactive target of change. Note: ABSEL scholarship, in this vein, can be viewed as constructive proactivity.

Over many years of behaving in these roles in the educational system (a career long period of time for instructors and at least 17 years for MBA students), instructors tend to gravitate to the persona of a powerful intellectually domineering “parent” and the student tends to gravitate to the persona of a

passive or alienated “child.” Is it therefore any wonder that students often not only fail to embrace our learning paradigms, but also to even resist them? ABSEL scholars rejected the “sage on the stage”/professor as lecturer model from ABSEL’s inception. We have preferred instead to put together a 35-year long catalog of more involving education processes using our experiential and simulation tools. That said, if you listen to our rhetoric as we describe ourselves and our paradigms, we reflect to this day the traditional instructor/student framework. Alternatively, education as discourse redefines these roles and proceeds from the perspective of a shared journey of meaning making.

What happens (or does not happen) in the absence of education as discourse. What if the instructor’s point of view is extant (Note: these are often found encapsulated in course syllabi), but the student does not share an understanding of or an enthusiasm for that point of view? From a pure communication perspective, this would result in one-way and/or limited communication—with the instructor playing the role of unheard sender and the student playing the role of indifferent or tuned out target receiver. The opposite of this scenario would be a case where the student is desirous of a learning experience that the instructor is not willing or is not able to deliver. A disconnect exists in both scenarios that shuts down the motivation(s) of both the instructor and the student and truncates the learning process before it can begin.

What if.....35 years ago, ABSEL had adopted an education as discourse perspective? Focusing on shared meaning making, what would ABSEL scholars have produced over these 35 years that would function to eliminate student apathy, or combat student resistance to meaningful personal change? What mechanisms would we have created, and then refined and polished, that would create learning systems wherein students make decisions that are consciously self-serving for learning and personal growth, are based on information they believe to be valid and useful, and that yield learning motivation that is of sufficient magnitude and strength to enter and sustain them through the liminal stages of separation, transformation in the limin, and reincorporation?

LIMINALITY

What if.....35 years ago, ABSEL scholars had adopted the model of liminality as the benchmark to assess the power of our experiential and simulation driven pedagogies and then measured student progress by the degree to which they functioned successfully in each of the three liminal stages? What mechanisms might we have identified and implemented over 35 years that would move our students not to just sign up for a class or sit down for an exercise, but rather, to make the significant and personally binding commitment to separate themselves from “what had been” and then to dedicate themselves to “what will be”?

What learning system characteristics would we have identified and codified by now to implement into our experiential exercises and simulations processes that help students make a transformational journey through liminality? Persons undergoing transformation are often seeking anchor points to cement their new identities. How many anchor point techniques would we have in our pedagogical toolbox by now? If we had taken a shared journey and education as discourse

perspective into managing students in a liminal state, what facilitation tools and helping mechanisms might we have developed over 35 years?

What if we had adopted the liminality concept of reincorporation into every one of our simulations and experiential exercises over the 35 years? Would we accept student self report as evidence of reincorporation? Would our methodologies have become so efficacious relative to desired learning outcomes that they would now dominate business education? Would we be the source for answers on skill application after the university experience? On job selection? On early career success? On long-term career success? Would ABSEL's mission statement and decades of scholarship have produced a different set of outcomes if we were at our inception also known as the Association for Lasting Change and Ongoing Application (ALCOA within ABSEL)?

EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

What if.....35 years ago, we had adopted the epideictic rhetoric perspective of focusing on the present? How much better would we be at processing the process dimension? Would we have done a better job of learning from the past as opposed to re-hashing the past? Would we have done a better job of avoiding being bogged down in the morass and complexity of the present? What would have happened if we had subjected every piece of research and every proposed pedagogical scheme to the test of what was being created in the moment?

What would we have accomplished over 35 years if we had subjected each phase of the unfreezing, changing, refreezing model in our scholarship to the six-stage epideictic rhetoric model proposed earlier in this paper? Any experiential exercise or simulation would be improved by putting it to the systematic test of: 1) learning need(s) identified, 2) whole person experiential education, 3) demonstration, 4) legitimization, 5) reinforcement and positive feedback, and 6) environmental testing. Moreover, as already stated, what if the more powerful three-stage model of liminality had been substituted for the Lewinian model and that had been subjected to the six-stage epideictic rhetoric test at each of the three phases of separation, liminal transformation and reincorporation? What accomplishments would that have wrought over 35 years of consistent application?

CONCLUSION

In closing, please understand that this paper is not meant to be a criticism of ABSEL's 35 years or the collected works of ABSEL scholarship. In fact, I feel that ABSEL's accomplishments have been magnificent and fully stand on their own merit. What I am suggesting is that ABSEL scholars, after 35 years of concerted and productive effort, might want to think a moment and perhaps step back to assess the models we have been using to conduct the bulk of our activities. Perhaps we should do more exploration of alternative models, adopted from other disciples. Perhaps we should focus our efforts on creating a new vocabulary of experiential learning and simulation, or maybe a vocabulary that is more integrative and functions to produce a shared terminology for our educational pedagogies.

The three arenas of activity I have addressed in this paper are: 1) the instructor/student paradigms we have adopted, 2) the models of change, learning and personal development we have been using, and 3) the language and rhetorical perspective we have been taking. As alternatives, I have taken a multi-disciplinary sampling of concepts and approaches from other disciplines and suggested their efficacy for enhancing experiential learning. I also note that the concepts I have selected—education as discourse, liminality, and epideictic rhetoric--- can be conceptualized as functioning as a triadic and mutually reinforcing whole.

ABSEL scholars will continue to develop and refine our educational pedagogies. The adoption of the perspectives suggested in this paper, and/or conceptual schemes from other disciplines, could have an impact on ABSEL scholarship as we go forward for the next 35 years.

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