

ABSEL REFLECTIONS: 40 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE, NOW GOING FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on forty years of ABSEL's existence, this paper is a collection of personalized reflections and observations. The paper looks back over the last forty years, but also looks ahead to see where ABSEL might go the next forty years. Contrasts between ABSEL "then, now and into the future" are made relative to faculty, administration, students, ABSEL scholarship and the vicissitudes of the environment surrounding ABSEL. The paper concludes with a celebration of "the ABSEL Style" as the factor that not only separated us from the rest of the pack at ABSEL's inception, but also gives us a competitive advantage going forward into the next 40 years.

INTRODUCTION

Note: This paper draws from a paper I wrote for ABSEL in 2007 entitled "ABSEL Redux". The difference is the focus on the 40-year time span, and a focus on ABSEL going forward for the next 40 years. In this paper, due to the personal nature of its content, I will not follow the usual standards applied to refereed papers in an academic setting, and make an effort to conceal my identity. I also wish recognize fully that my memories of years past (and my views of the present and future) may suffer from a "rose colored glasses" effect, a myopic effect, or simply be limited by me only being able to see what I can see. In this sense, I defer to any reader who can remember what really happened, or any reader who may actually know what is going on now.

In 1974, I was one of the 98 people in Oklahoma City at the first ABSEL meeting ever held. I went on to attend ABSEL for the next decade, departing in the early eighties for a career as an entrepreneur and businessperson. I returned to academe and ABSEL after all of the millennial fuss died down, and have been here ever since. My story here reflects a heavy involvement in ABSEL that spans the life of the organization because I have the distinct honor of twice serving as ABSEL President. I was ABSEL President in 1980 and I now serve as ABSEL President in 2013. My published papers in ABSEL span the first years and the last years of its existence. Thus, I was there when "this stuff" was all new and shiny, and I labor on as an ABSEL scholar as "this stuff" has become sometimes institutionalized, sometimes taken for granted and sometimes overly discounted. This paper contains my reflections, observations and thoughts on ABSEL's traditions of excellence and issues as ABSEL looks forward to the next 40 years.

THE EARLY YEARS OF ABSEL

The current Board and I feel that it is important in 2013 to be looking forward to the future of ABSEL and to the future of simulation and experiential learning. Therefore, I will only briefly talk about ABSEL's early years in this paper, mostly excerpting part of my 2007 paper. For those wishing more on the early years of ABSEL, I refer you to Hoover (2007).

The term "experiential learning" was still new and heady stuff in ABSEL's early years. Kolb, Rubin and McIntyre (1971) had published the first textbook/workbook on experiential learning (*Organizational Psychology: An Experiential Approach*) in 1971, and by 1974/1975 that book, which had no real competition as of yet, was beginning to get a number of adoptions at some of the more progressive institutions of higher learning. In fact, I was hired in my first full time tenure track academic position by a new dean of the business school at our university for the express purpose of adding the experiential learning component to our business school's pedagogical mix. I thus found myself not only teaching the first experiential class ever taught at our university, but also designing and implementing it. (Please note that I am making these points not to blow my own horn, but simply to put experiential learning and simulation in the 70's in perspective for the reader 40 years later.)

The point is that experiential learning and simulation were new to the students, new to the faculty, new to business schools in general and finding a growing level of acceptance and success. Bernie Keys was sharp enough to see all of this going down along with an emerging simulation movement; thus was ABSEL born.

All of the early ABSEL players were excited and highly energized. We could tell that we were on to something, we loved what we were doing, and we believed in what we were doing. It was exhilarating to be part of a collection of talented and innovative individuals who came together to form an association devoted to furthering not only our own teaching effectiveness but also outcomes beneficial to students.

Dick Buskirk took the position that "There is a fervor (in ABSEL) that is absent in other meetings" (Buskirk, 1975, foreword). It was undeniable that ABSEL was evolving as an association that was establishing its own unique identity. I was also active in the Management Education and Development Division (MED) of the national Academy of Management at this same time and the contrasts were notable.

In the 70's I knew almost everyone who was active in the Academy of Management MED just as I knew almost

everyone who was active in ABSEL (the groups were not that different in size in those days, although I would guess that the MED has more reviewers now than ABSEL has members). However, size was where the similarities stopped. Both groups were looking at experiential learning and simulation as an emerging phenomenon at the time, but the approach was very different in tone and the collegial behavior was very different as well. At the MED sessions, people presented a paper to a mostly passive audience, and all seemed eager to bolt out of the meeting rooms so that they could stand in the hallway and be recognized. The MED papers and presentations had a lot of “one-upmanship” (my sample is bigger than yours, etc.), while the ABSEL papers were all about exploring and expanding the effectiveness of our ability to design and to deliver more effective learning experiences for students. ABSEL sessions were characterized by lots of interaction, and people only left the room to go to the next ABSEL session, where the active and lively “ABSEL fervor” identified by Buskirk would begin anew.

I was Program Chairman in 1978 in Denver, and then as President Elect in 1979 in New Orleans I noted what had by then come to be accepted by ABSEL members: “ABSEL is like no other organization...Our meetings are lively, and highly interactive, and are characterized by high levels of information, idea and technique exchanges. It is these exchanges that caused ABSEL to be born, and it is the contribution of the quality of collegial association in ABSEL that makes it an attractive and healthy organization truly like no other” (Hoover, 1979, foreword). In 1980, in Dallas as ABSEL President, I finally managed to record in writing a verification of what had by then come to be known and recognized by ABSEL members as the ABSEL Style: “As we move toward the future, I am hopeful that we can retain the ABSEL style ---an intellectual environment characterized by an open exchange of ideas and viewpoints, an organization characterized by member input and involvement” (Hoover, 1980, foreword).

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION ISSUES

In the introduction to this paper, I talked about simulation and experiential learning as “sometimes institutionalized, sometimes taken for granted and sometimes overly discounted.” I would like to expand those possible states of being by talking about faculty and administration issues. In the early days of ABSEL, there was an air of curiosity about experiential learning and simulation. I remember both the administration and the faculty having an attitude of something like “let’s see what you can do” as simulations were adopted for the strategy classes and experiential exercises were used in behavioral classes. That was then.

These days, I see a wide range of reactions from administration and faculty when simulation and experiential learning is talked about. ABSEL’s fields of study are not necessarily seen as “wallpaper”, but they are too rarely, in my opinion, seen as special. In many schools, even where simulation and experiential learning have successful implementations, there is often an air of

institutionalism. Furthermore, when simulations and experiential exercises make students happy, the results are not seen as being sourced in something unique and differentiating. However, (see student section below), when students seem to find simulations and experiential exercises frustrating, the exercises are often seen as flawed and needing replacement.

While the truth is probably that most faculty and administration big wigs are simply indifferent to simulation and experiential learning, there is evidence of negativity as well. While I used to hear comments such as “It’s great that our students are practicing and learning behavioral skills,” now I hear comments like “Our students need more course content.” For example, my university’s College of Business faculty, perhaps for a variety of reasons, has voted in recent years to drop the simulation-based undergraduate strategy class from the list of required courses for an undergraduate business degree; our accounting faculty has a proposal for accounting majors to drop one of the required MBA behavioral classes (that uses experiential learning) and substitute a CPA Exam cram course; a graduate level skills-based experiential organizational behavior course has been dropped from the course offerings; and an experiential course for graduating MBA student has been dropped from the MBA program.

While it is true that I am drawing inferences from a small sample size of one university, I have had conversations at Academy of Management meetings and ABSEL meetings that describe parallel trends in other college of business programs. The summary point here is that ABSEL scholars cannot assume, if they ever did, that the faculty and administrative components of our universities fully support or even fully understand the benefits of simulation and experiential learning in their university learning systems. ABSELers, going forward, may need to take a proactive posture and an assertive/borderline aggressive stance just in order to maintain the current status quo status.

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS

A colleague of mine recently asked me what I saw as the biggest difference I notice between my first and my current academic careers. The answer was easy --- the students have changed dramatically, especially, in my opinion, in their ability and willingness to process simulation and experiential learning challenges and opportunities. A quick and dirty answer would be to say that “modern” students are lazier than students from the days of yore. However, it is not that simple.

Comparing the student population I experienced in ABSEL’s early years, with the student population of today, I wind up focusing on two issues: 1) how students process experience, and, 2) how students process information. First, I will examine how students process experience. In the old days, students were quite willing to assume the decision-making roles of a simulation or the behavioral roles of an experiential exercise. I honestly do not remember having trouble in the old days with students throwing up their hands and giving up on an exercise. If they failed or were

stumped, I remember students giving it a go a second or a third time until they got it right.

Students seemed to welcome the chance to do something in a low risk/high learning reward classroom rather than follow a lecture or prepare for an exam. Modern students often seem to prefer “packaged exams” and static course material that they can memorize. In the simplest terms, they simply seem to prefer the simple. They are more comfortable with “packaged” materials that they are used to and that they are good at manipulating without having to challenge themselves or stretch to learn.

This is more than just laziness; I feel that it is an addiction to simplicity in learning, combined with a dearth of intellectual curiosity or a felt need to improve. Recent ABSEL papers have examined these trends. Hoover (2011) labeled this process as a form of complexity avoidance, ascribing much of the phenomenon to trends in increased levels of student narcissism. Markulis, Murff and Strang (2011) have asked the question --- Do ABSElers need to change their teaching styles to fit the millennial student?

The simulation experience is also affected by the characteristics of the modern student, as the students of today are products of an era of virtual gaming. On everything from a home computer to an arcade game to an X-Box, the students we have in our classrooms today have probably logged thousands of hours of time slaying dragons, exploring the world of Halo, fighting battles, scoring touchdowns on Madden or surviving the mean streets of Grand Theft Auto. It may be hard for today's students to don a CEO's hat in a strategy simulation, or engage in a challenging communication role play where they are required to engage in active listening to understand the other person's point of view, when the night before they reached the apex of the world of Mario Brothers simply by clicking the right buttons the right number of times. The question I ponder now is how much of student boredom when it manifests or students not engaging in exercises comes from the fact that they are conditioned to more “pizzazz” than we offer in many of our simulations or experiential exercises?

The examples above come from how students process experience. The other potential stumbling block for simulation and experiential learning today is how students process information. Trust me when I say that 40 years ago we had no idea (or even the framework of an idea) that such a thing as a Google internet search response (that can generate hundreds of thousands of “answers” in hundredths of a second) would be possible. In addition, who could have imagined that such a thing would be available anywhere we went, and that it would have a zero cost? ABSEL was begun in an era when the concept of an encyclopedia still made sense. ABSEL going forward will live in the world of Wikipedia.

The fact is that the students we now have in our classrooms, except maybe for older MBA students, have had the Google option as part of their lives for as long as they have been old enough to ask questions about information. In other words, they have grown up in a world where all the information they could ever want could be generated in the blink of an eye about any topic they could type on a keyboard (and it is even put in order of “importance” to make it easier). As a result, I have

concluded that many of today's students suffer from what I call a “Google Syndrome.” They are conditioned to instant answers, and to having those answers produced not by their own labor and sweat, but instantaneously by the touch of a button.

My observation is that Google Syndrome students confuse information generation with insight; or more succinctly, they do not have a learning history or an information processing set of experiences that allows them to appreciate that true insight comes from introspection, self-awareness and personal growth that requires a significant level of effort. As a result, they may be poorer candidates for simulation or experiential exercises than students of 40 years ago may. Going forward to the next 40 years, we will have students to whom the invention of the internet will be long forgotten history. I strongly suspect that we will need to adjust our learning system designs and processes of implementation if we are to have a chance to meaningfully impact the post-millennial student.

ENVIRONMENTAL VICISSITUDES

This part of the paper contains negative imagery. However, if ABSEL is to make it for another 40 years, I feel that it is important to look at issues that could threaten its continuing existence. I label these “environmental vicissitudes” because most of them are sourced outside of ABSEL's realm, but have a potential impact nonetheless. I have broken them down into four general categories.

1) *Perception of ABSEL Scholarship by Key Stakeholders*: ABSEL research and scholarship has been examined over the last 40 years (see Wolfe, 1976; Gentry and Wolfe, 1981; Butler, et al, 1985; Anderson and Lawton, 1996; and Gentry, et al, 1998 for some examples). One observation I would make is that the creation and subsequent maintenance of the Bernie Keys Library, as a source of conference papers and research archives, is an amazing and truly meaningful accomplishment. All of the many who have worked to produce and maintain the Bernie Keys Library should be very proud of their work product.

However, I am now concerned about how ABSEL scholarship is viewed in academe outside of the ABSEL network. My concern is not about the quality of ABSEL scholarship, but how the kind of scholarship conducted by ABSEL is viewed by key stakeholders. Let me share one example from my area of scholarly pursuit, management and organizational behavior.

The Academy of Management publishes a number of journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal* and the *Academy of Management Review*. The one that would be of primary interest to ABSElers is *Academy of Management Learning and Education* (AMLE). Colleges of business all across the world recognize these journals as prime target publication outlets, and the journals are thus rated as “A” level journals. At my school, for example, I have two AMLE publications (2010 and 2012) that have earned me academic credit within the system since AMLE is rated an “A” journal at my school.

However, I know of a colleague that also has AMLE publications and was recently denied tenure at his university, primarily because his school gave him no credit

for his AMLE acceptances. The reason? His faculty has decreed that “pedagogy research” is not real research, and thus does not count. I know of other colleges of business that have a similar stance.

My concern is that if key stakeholders such as university faculties and university administrators continue to magnify this trend, that the kind of research and writing that characterizes ABSEL will fall into less and less favor. ABSEL, going forward, needs to address this issue, perhaps even developing and disseminating a pro ABSEL research and writing public relations campaign.

2) *Holding Our Own as a Secondary Affiliation*: One of ABSEL’s strengths, and something that I have always found refreshing and enjoyed about ABSEL, is that it is multi-disciplinary. ABSEL is not trapped in the academic silos that are found in national management, marketing, accounting, etc. academic organizations. I have always enjoyed the cross-fertilization that has resulted from this collegial association of disciplines in our organization.

However, a scholar has to allocate time, effort and travel funds (see below) across any given year, and over time, across multiple years. ABSEL not only competes in this regard with national meetings, but also with regional meetings, some of which have become quite large. At these larger meetings, not only does formal recruiting occur, but there is also a broad networking functionality within one’s own primary discipline. ABSEL, going forward, will need to continue to recruit and envelop young (see below) emerging scholars. In this sense, I feel that ABSEL needs to develop a marketing plan that packages and sells the benefits of ABSEL affiliation, lest we lose out to our larger silo-oriented competitors over time.

3) *Travel Funding Concerns*: One of the problems with ABSEL being a secondary association for its academic members is getting university funding for travel. Even getting money for national meetings is becoming more difficult at almost every university. Getting monies for meetings without a primary academic affiliation rationale has become a tougher and tougher sell for ABSEL members. It is my guess, lack of travel funding is one of the prime reasons that ABSEL has struggled with meeting attendance in recent years.

4) *ABSEL’s Aging Population Challenge*: We celebrate ABSEL’s 40th year, and we should do so. I, for one, am more than just a little bit happy to still be here. Nonetheless, there is a reality that cannot be ignored --- that 40 years later, folks are 40 years older. Many solid, dependable members are now retired (and thus fund their own travel). While the admirable and inimitable Ken Goosen has made all 40 years of meetings, can we expect to see him for the next 40 years? Look at an ABSEL meeting assemblage, imagine taking all of the grey hairs out of the picture, and ask yourself if enough remain to sustain a viable organization. ABSEL, going forward, has to recruit, inculcate and “sign up to stay” new members.

In summary, ABSEL does not exist as a self-sustaining island. As a subset of a larger environment, we are subject to the vicissitudes and realities of that environment. ABSEL, going forward, needs to protect and enhance the prestige of its scholarship, needs to market the value of an ABSEL affiliation and participation, needs to actively

compete for tightening travel funds and needs to replace its aging members. The good news is that these are all doable because.....

AN IMPORTANT CONCLUSION: THE ABSEL STYLE LIVES AND CAN LIVE ON

Of all of the things that I enjoy about ABSEL, the single largest vat of delight comes from the ABSEL style. This “style” of collegial interaction evolved into something unique and special in ABSEL’s early years. The good news is that it still survives, 40 years later, and is healthy to this day. In 1979 I described ABSEL sessions as “lively, and highly interactive, and (were) characterized by high levels of information, idea and technique exchanges” (Hoover, 1979, foreword). Dick Buskirk would, I believe, find a great deal of intellectual “fervor” in modern day sessions as well (Buskirk, 1975). In addition, finally, ABSEL remains fun. Getting ready for the ABSEL 2013 meeting, I have had a number of “affectionate collegial insult” exchanges with Jim Gentry that have made me laugh out loud.

Exploring the genesis of the ABSEL Style, I went back and looked at the early explanations of the ABSEL organization, that were probably penned by folks such as Bernie Keys, to see if I could find descriptors of not only where ABSEL was conceived as being at its inception, as well as any ideas of where ABSEL felt it was going. The quote below is what ABSEL’s founders envisioned in 1974, 1975, 1976, etc. as the “final analysis” of ABSEL’s purpose and identity: I feel that we should embrace this sentiment, combine it with the modern version of the ABSEL Style, and use it as our foundation reflecting not only where ABSEL has been for the last 40 years, but also where it might go for the next 40.

“In the final analysis, ABSEL is an association. Its activities and publications are important, but its real meaning is the association among people interested in simulation, games, and experiential learning that ABSEL hopes to foster and encourage.” (Part of the Introduction section from early ABSEL Proceedings).

SUMMARY AND CLOSE

This reflective paper attempts to address the excellence of ABSEL for the last 40 years, as well as its challenges and opportunities going forward. So, what are my main conclusions upon attempting this writing challenge? There are two things really. One is an embracing of what has sprung from the “real meaning of ABSEL as an association among people” as highlighted above. This is a reaffirmation that ABSEL really did develop the distinct ABSEL style in its early days, that this “style” was real, and that it was truly worthwhile. The second realization is that ABSEL is “still styling” to this day. Looking into the future, I feel that ABSEL’s demonstrated capacity for professional/collegial intimacy and personalized exchanges gives us a competitive edge.

This is not to say that we do not face some challenges as an association of lively colleagues going forward. I have touched on a few of them in this paper. We need to keep our administrators and faculty colleagues convinced of the value of what we offer. We need to shape the design and delivery of our exercises to fit the needs and characteristics of the modern student. And we need to keep our scholarship perspectives fresh as we deal with the challenges of environmental vicissitudes.

Importantly, and perhaps most of all, I feel that we need to continue to cherish and polish the ABSEL Style. I will close this paper by repeating what I said as ABSEL President in 1980. It was a fervent hope I had in 1980, and, as I sit as ABSEL President in 2013, it is a fervent hope I am happy to say I have today.

As we move toward the future, I am hopeful that we can retain the ABSEL style, an intellectual environment characterized by an open exchange of ideas and viewpoints, an organization characterized by member input and involvement.

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