

EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING MAY LEAD TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

James W. Gentry
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
jgentry@unl.edu

Lee Phillip McGinnis
Washburn University
Lee.Mcginnis@washburn.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an old issue at ABSEL, whether we are really dealing with experiential learning or whether we may be guilty of straying into experiential teaching. We assert that many, if not most, ABSEL papers take the instructor's perspective in terms of design and implementation, and ignore the maxim that "all that is taught is not learned." Acknowledging one of our earlier president's philosophies ("If it feels good, do it"), we attempt to provide justification for our frequent emphasis on "experiential teaching."

INTRODUCTION

Some have questioned whether ABSEL is concerned with "experiential learning" or with "experiential teaching." For example, Gentry (1990) and Gentry et al. (1998) noted that most work in ABSEL has dealt with discussions of new, modified, or existing pedagogical instruments (exercises, games, role plays, or whatever) as opposed to systematic investigation of the student learning that may or may not be taking place. Most ABSEL presentations represent the instructor's frame of reference (and his/her learning objectives), rather than the student's actual takeaway. (one word?)

This is not to say that ABSEL has ignored "learning;" there has been much work discussing learning, though its measurement has been far less than impressive. All too often ABSEL researchers have evaluated their pedagogies with measures of affect (including subjective measures of perceived learning) as opposed to objective measures of cognitive and/or behavioral learning (see Gentry et al. 1998 for a review). This is surprising given the nature of assessment practices stipulated by accreditation associations such as AACSB, which put learning accountability at the forefront of teaching. It is pleasurable for us as instructors if our students like our classes, but that does not convince skeptical others that students have "learned" in a similar fashion. Given the well-documented problems associated

with measuring "learning," we argue that 1) it is understandable that much of ABSEL's real emphasis is on "experiential teaching," and 2) that this is fine, in the grand scheme of things, in that it is likely to lead to student learning.

THE EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING PERSPECTIVE

The specific stimulus for this paper was a presentation at last year's conference by a young Assistant Professor, who discussed a successful learning experience involving a rather complicated pricing context. I would venture to label the topic "esoteric;" if I found it so, I would imagine that the undergraduates in the class probably would as well. My comments to the presenter that evening included the observation that the same pedagogy used by someone less articulate, less impassioned, and less charismatic probably would not have the same level of success.

Most pedagogical research falls short of "good" experimental research, for many well-documented reasons (Butler, Markulis, and Strang 1985; Wolfe 1977, 1981). Thus, many alternative explanations may exist to explain the "success" of the learning experience. [We will assume that it was indeed successful, as the session participants clearly responded favorably to the presentation.] All of us are familiar with instructors capable of lighting up a room with their enthusiastic classroom presences. Who is to say that their interpersonal capabilities would not be able to motivate the class to learn through the use of an alternative pedagogy? Certainly all of us in ABSEL are not blessed with the gifts of those truly talented teachers, but we argue that the process of "experiential teaching" may in fact facilitate learning, by first influencing the instructor to make more enthusiastic class presentations.

To have sufficient substance to generate the typical acceptance, ABSEL authors need to have either developed something new or, at a minimum, fit an existing pedagogy to their specific course structure in a somewhat novel

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manner. This level of creativity (or, possibly, limited co-production) is involving, often highly so. When one is sufficiently proud of one's efforts to write about them in manuscript form, one is extremely involved. And one is predisposed to discuss the "ideal," the exercise as designed (and not necessarily as implemented) and its intended effects (and not necessarily what is actually learned). After all, one is very privy to the structure since one has been involved in that, and most likely the focus of one's efforts. Comprehending the students' reactions to the stimulus is less proximate to the instructor's attention, and getting a handle on how the exercise is received is a far more difficult task. Thus, the "experiential teaching" nature of many ABSEL presentations is very understandable. What may not be as obvious is that this experiential teaching may in fact be very effective in terms of stimulating learning.

EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING FACILITATING LEARNING

Loewenstein (1994, p. 93) noted that "educators know much more about educating motivated students than they do about motivating them in the first place." One reason ABSELers believe in the use of pedagogies facilitating experiential learning is that we believe that students like the experiences; after all, we call them "games." But it is a bit simplistic to consider that the student is motivated by the exercise alone; one needs to also consider the context in which the exercise is introduced and administered, and the instructor doing that. As noted above, the preparation on the part of the instructor for the use of the exercise (especially if the instructor developed the exercise himself or herself) is in itself involving (and motivating). Thus, the instructor comes to the classroom environment more enthusiastic about what is being taught, and frequently that enthusiasm is contagious.

The effects of instructor enthusiasm on the students are well documented. In Darling-Hammond's (1999) review on effective teaching, she reported that in addition to enthusiasm, teacher clarity, task-oriented behavior, teacher's ability to ask higher order questions, use student ideas, and probe student comments, have also been deemed important in student learning. All of these characteristics, however, relate to the ability of the teacher to move students in a somewhat experiential way. In Dukes and Victoria's study (1989), they, too, found that effective teaching, of which enthusiasm was a component, had a stronger effect on teaching evaluations than did gender or status of the professor.

Though enthusiasm has been deemed important in creating an interest in a topic, it alone in many cases is not enough to sustain student interest. It is also necessary for teachers to demonstrate to others why their subject merits their enthusiasm (Sowey 1995). Sherman et al.'s (1987) research indicates similar findings, that teachers can do all the "right

things," such as plan systematically, set objectives, and provide frequent feedback, and this may still not be enough to separate excellent teachers from the others. Other factors are also necessary to achieve excellence, one of which is enthusiasm. Enthusiasm, it appears, is one of the leading factors in achieving experiential teaching effectiveness, due to the fact that it not only inspires students but inspires great teaching through preparation.

Thus, we argue that those instructors motivated to try new approaches to teaching may well be motivating to their students in return. Unmotivated students resist learning; motivated students are more receptive to the wisdom we try to impart. The nature of our preparation for the classroom may well impact our level of enthusiasm when we get there. If we are highly motivated, then we are more likely to motivate.

Experiential teaching is limited in perspective; we clearly need to focus more on what the student actually receives. But, at the same time, the highly involving nature of co-producing the learning experience for the student can generate contagious enthusiasm that motivates students to learn. So, while we may never have definitive evidence to convince our skeptical colleagues that our experiential pedagogies are more effective than alternative teaching approaches, we should not lose our enthusiasm for experiential teaching. If it motivates us to teach with greater enthusiasm, what's to lose? As one scholar notes:

To give a good lecture, you have to become excited about the material and be able to convey your sense of enthusiasm to the class. Of course, I am assuming you have outlined the material you want to cover and that the content is sound. But if you can convey a sense of excitement and enthusiasm for what you are talking about, you will never give a bad lecture. Enthusiasm is contagious; so is boredom. If you are tired of what you are teaching, don't expect your students to be interested in what you have to say (Reed, 1989, p. 555).

Over 30 years ago at ABSEL, Shreier (1976) in a discussion of the evaluation of learning in an experiential context, dared to ask the question, "Why do we evaluate experiential learning efforts?" and then suggested that we [ABSEL] 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.'" His teaching philosophy, "If it feels good, do it" was used in the title of the paper and became a frequently repeated phrase at subsequent ABSEL conferences. We agree with that philosophy, because we believe that, if it feels good to the instructor, it will motivate him/her to be more enthusiastic in class, and that such enthusiasm will likely be contagious. Long live "experiential teaching."

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