

The Experience of Experiential Exercises in Management Classes: A Professor's View

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Abstract

The experiential exercise is a teaching method that allows students to be engaged in the learning process. Experiential learning is widely recognized as an effective way for students to learn about essential business management topics. Experiential exercises are employed as a means to increase the student's comprehension of such topics as innovation and creativity, social responsibility and ethics, team effectiveness, decision making, organizational and international culture, emotional intelligence, and conflict management. A key to the experiential exercise is that it provides an opportunity for the student to learn in a manner that shifts them from a passive to an active participant in the learning process. While research emphasizes the relationship between experiential exercises and student learning, little has been written about experiential exercises and facilitator learning. This paper proposes that preparation; using student feedback and the reflective mode of the Experiential Learning Theory model may increase facilitator learning and contribute to the successful implementation of experiential exercises in the classroom. The paper includes the author's experience with experiential exercises and recommendation for future study.

Keywords: Experiential, Learning, Business, Management, Experiential Learning Theory

Introduction

Over the past few decades, experiential learning has increased in popularity. Numerous studies describe incorporating the experiential exercise to facilitate student learning on the topics of innovation and creativity, social responsibility and ethics, team effectiveness, decision making, organizational and international culture, emotional intelligence, and conflict management (Armstrong, 1999; Bacon, Stewart & Giclas, 1996; Blanton & Barbuto 2005; Duhon, Bushardt, & Daniel, 2006; Gibson, 2006; King, 1998; Ledman, 2001; Moore & Ryan, 2006; York, 1995). While this list is not intended to be exhaustive, it demonstrates that the experiential exercise is a useful tool for facilitating learning on a wide array of topics in the management discipline.

Experiential learning theory defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984: 41). Experiential learning can be understood as a form of learning by doing. However, this is much too simplistic of a description for experiential learning. In fact, the experiential learning process follows the mechanics of the brain as described below:

...concrete experiences come through the sensory cortex, reflective observation involves the integrative cortex at the back, creating new abstract concepts that occurs in the frontal cortex, and active testing involves the motor brain (Zull, 2002: 18-19).

In addition, Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning contains a model conceptualizing a learning cycle that contains four related modes. The four modes are experience, reflection on the experience, thinking, and then finally, action, or in other words, putting into practice what has been learned.

While experiential theory has in the past been applied to student learning, this paper presents the argument that the theory also applies to facilitator learning. In particular, the mode of reflection on the experience can assist the facilitator in the successful implementation of the experiential exercise. In addition, preparation and the use of student feedback may also aid the successful implementation of experiential exercises in Management classes.

Overcoming Resistance

Even though the evidence is strong to support the benefits of experiential exercises, this model of instruction departs from the traditional teaching method. “In most college classrooms, the professor lectures and the students listen and take notes. The professor is the central figure, the ‘sage on the stage,’ the one who has the knowledge and transmits that knowledge to the students” (King, 1993: 30). In addition, a problem exists in the power of the status quo. “Lecturing has dominated postsecondary education for centuries” and despite considerable research that this practice should change, the status quo continues (Johnson, et al, 2007: 27). Therefore making the transition from the traditional teaching method to experiential exercises may pose a challenge to professors. It can be easier to stay with a method that has worked for years. However, even though a

particular method has worked in the past does not preclude other teaching methods from being just as effective or perhaps even more effective.

Perhaps it's the preconceived notion that carries over from childhood that a professor should always have the answers. A colleague once commented that perhaps this notion was first embedded in our brains from the television episodes of "Gilligan's Island" that portrayed the Professor as the source of knowledge and subsequently the instigator of a solution for the problem or situation the group of castaways encountered. The reality is that teachers do not always have all the answers, and should therefore be relieved from an insurmountable burden.

Nonetheless, a professor's reluctance of trying something new and different in the classroom is real. Developing a teaching method that departs from the traditional teaching strategy where the professor is the sole source of information may challenge the professor's own self perception concerning their role as a teacher (Grasha, 2002). While this is understandable, not trying a different method of teaching keeps one in a non-growth and non-learning range. Author Peter Senge, known for his cutting edge work on learning organizations states "through learning, we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we were never able to do"(Senge, 1990: 11).

One element that should be exercised when implementing the experiential exercise is the willingness on the professor's part to take a risk. This is in sharp contrast to the teaching model where the professor lectures facts and students take notes. "It is fun to teach when you can take command of a group of people and share your knowledge and experiences. The experience is personally rewarding and self-perpetuating" (Grasha, 2002: 82). Every class has its own personality and there is not always a known outcome for every experiential exercise. The past experiences, training, age and attitude of the class will have its own unique experience with an exercise. There are no guarantees that even an exercise that has been highly successful in the past will always be successful. However, the experiential exercise creates a learning opportunity for both the student and professor.

Mentors

When the author first began teaching, endless hours were spent going over theories, memorizing important dates, authors and citations. This method of teaching follows the transmittal model where the professor transmits the knowledge to the student (King, 1993). This was a somewhat stressful way to prepare for class because the focus was on making sure that students got the correct information during the lecture. It also seemed this was a somewhat accepted way of teaching since no other methods of instruction had been experienced. Formal training of professors tends to create traditional teaching methods that create passive rather than active learners (Grasha, 2002).

Much of graduate training for many prospective faculty is focused more on learning about conducting solid research. Many colleagues already entrenched in the midst of their academic careers consistently lament the virtues of being a strong researcher. You may recall the following conversation between two college professors, Dr. Dexter Cornell and Dr. Graham Corey, in a scene from Charles E. Pogue's 1988 film *D.O.A.*:

Corey: "Hey, Dex! Dex, you ought to slow down in this heat."

Cornell: "I thought you were a Ph.D. Dr. Corey, not an MD."

Corey: "You know what I am. I'm an assistant professor, mortgaged to the eyeballs with two kids and a third on the way."

Cornell: "Oh congratulations Graham, boy or girl?"

Corey: "The word around the faculty lounge is that you recommended your friend Hal to the Dean, Dex. I've been here longer, I was next in line."

Cornell: "Well, I didn't put Hal's novel on Putman's spring list, Graham. You know academic politics as well as I do: 'Publish or Perish'... Always has been, always will be."

During the early years of a professor's career much emphasis is placed on achieving success in the publishing arena and achieving tenure. "More and more university educators are cognizant of the fact that academic rank and acquisition of tenure hinges on one's ability to research and publish and not on success in classroom teaching" (Mensah, 1982: 578). Research indicates that, regardless of marital status, assistant professors on a tenure track in the United States work on average more than 50 hours per week (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004). Additionally, based on information obtained from over 20,000 professors in 14 countries, there appears to be worldwide agreement that a strong record of successful research is important in faculty evaluation (Altbach & Lewis, 1995).

Mentors can have a dramatically beneficial effect on individual teaching methods of junior faculty (Bullard & Felder, 2003; Kemp & O'Keefe, 2003; Savage, Karp & Logue, 2004). New faculty members can learn from more experienced professors how to more efficiently use their time and shrink the learning curve that accompanies new course preparation. A colleague once suggested there were other ways for students to learn and related successes using experiential exercises. It sounded intriguing at the time and his willingness to honestly discuss the learning curve was fascinating. The reason for the fascination was due to the fact that the professor was referring to his own learning curve. He openly talked about his experience with experiential exercises; including those that succeeded and others that were somewhat less than successful. He explained that both were important because learning was always taking place. Certainly, in the successful experiences it was evident that the students had learned a great deal about the concepts under study. However, those less than successful were also key exercises because while students learned less about the concepts under study the professor learned more about how to better conduct experiential learning exercises.

Preparation and Planning

Preparation and planning can contribute to the success of conducting experiential exercises. As previously discussed in this paper, because the experiential exercise departs from traditional teaching methods, professors may be hesitant to attempt a different method of instruction. However, a positive outlook about the experience may contribute to the professor's performance and successful implementation of experiential exercises in the classroom. Historically, academic journals approached the topic of improving success from a coaching perspective drawing on constructs such as positive self-talk, focusing

and visualization (Howland, 2006). Another more cerebral coverage of the topic reports vividness of imagery was positively correlated with the number of aversions (Dadds et al, 2004). Findings from this experiment, where fear is defined as an aversion, documents that those subjects who are more adept at visualization, garner a much stronger influence in calming their fears. Although there is a variation among subjects in their ability to visualize, this research outlines visualization as a powerful tool.

Recently, positive psychology and more specifically, positive organizational behavior, have received an increasing amount of attention as an area of research interest (Fineman, 2006; Roberts, 2006). Positive psychology is defined as “the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005: 104). Positive organizational behavior is defined as “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Luthans & Church, 2002: 60). In fact, research findings show that hope, resilience, optimism and efficacy are positively related to work performance, where performance included both self-report and objective measures (Luthans, et al, 2007). “Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning, while positive feelings of attraction and interest may be essential for learning” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005: 208). Therefore, taking the time to adopt a positive position about the experiential exercise may contribute to a successful outcome.

Teachers in higher education face the challenge of adopting pedagogy that involves flexibility for exercises and active learning while managing the constraints of time in the classroom (Nijhuis & Collis, 2005). In order to effectively conduct experiential exercises, time management must be considered. A well-structured experiential exercise typically provides the total time needed for the exercise and the breakdown of time for each segment (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1980). For example, segments of the experiential exercise are: the amount of time to set up the classroom and get students into groups; the length of time for students to work on an activity; the length of time for discussion; and the time required to process the exercise. When possible, students can be asked to help as much as possible with such tasks as arranging desks, passing out written handouts, acting as observers, or conducting mathematical calculations (when appropriate) and returning materials to the facilitator at the end of the session.

As discussed previously in this paper, traditional teaching methods may indoctrinate students to a preconceived notion that a professor is looking for a right answer or a correct response. Therefore, it is important to not force any outcome and to attempt to make whatever happens a learning moment. Allow learning to take its course for each student (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1980). Give students a broad overview of the exercise, however take care not to overload or tell students what should happen. Be open to the student’s experience and encourage them to apply their experiential learning outcome to their own situation. Professors should be warned to not argue with students over results or do the exercise again in order to obtain certain conclusions (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1980).

The Reflective Process

In accordance with the experiential learning theory, the reflective mode is a critical step in the learning process for the student. Reflection allows for intentional

consideration of the experience and integration with other experiences to solidify learning (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

To enhance the reflective mode of experiential learning theory, students are sometimes required to write a reflective observation about the experiential exercise and turn it in (Young, 2003). Allowing student feedback allows the professor to have insight to the exercises from the learner's perspective (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). A careful and committed reading of the students' reflective observations offers insight into how they interpreted the experiential exercise and how they can apply what they learned.

However, this source of information can also be incorporated into the professor's reflective process. According to experiential learning theory, after the 'concrete experience' of the experiential exercise, the reflection mode allows a dissection of the experience. This mode allows the learner to think about the experience in ways that may introduce a "creative tension" and new implications can be drawn (Kolb & Kolb, 2005:194). The reflective process is open to the facilitator's own inquiry into what has been learned. The following is a sample of questions that may assist the facilitator's reflection on the experiential exercise:

Did the students write honestly about their experience and where they able to connect to the concepts under study?

Are there any changes that can be made to improve the facilitation of learning?

Did students have questions that could have been addressed early in the exercise or where they given so much information at one time that they were overwhelmed?

Reflection allows time for the facilitator to process how the exercise provided a learning opportunity for the students. Moreover, the facilitator's own introspection during the reflective mode creates a "learning space" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005: 199). The learning space concept emphasizes that learning does not occur in only one way, rather learning takes place in reference to the context of the environment. Therefore one should acknowledge that the context of the environment includes the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the students as well as the facilitator (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). In this way, the professor's creation of knowledge about the experiential exercise is unique and embedded in experiencing the exercise.

Use Student Feedback

Concerns for accountability and quality in teaching at the university level have spurred a 'scholarship of teaching and learning movement' (Boyer, 1990: Glassick et al, 1997). Numerous studies have sought to identify the underlying constructs of good teaching (Biggs, 1989, 2003: Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). Extending this body of work, Law, et al, (2007) identified good teaching practices not often identified. One finding underscores the importance of teachers "using student feedback as a pedagogical instrument" to improve their own learning (Law, et al, 2007: 255).

Student feedback may be obtained by requesting a global critique of the experiential exercises. This valuable information may be used to enhance facilitator learning about the implementation of experiential exercises. At the end of the semester,

students may evaluate all the experiential exercises conducted throughout the semester. Students can be asked to provide anonymous feedback on the exercises by indicating the exercises they recommend to keep for next semester and the ones they would not include. Students are also encouraged to anonymously offer suggestions on strengthening any of the exercises or a method of delivery that may improve the learning experience. Offering students the ability to provide anonymous feedback provides protection from identification if they write a negative review of an exercise. Allowing this protection contributes to an honest assessment of the exercises. Because the main objective is to facilitate student learning, the students' perspectives should receive preferential treatment. Thus if there is a majority of agreement among students that a particular exercise is ineffective, serious consideration should be given to its retirement. However, if the professor has made notes about a certain exercise and plans to make changes that will help better facilitate learning, it is possible to keep the exercise for the future.

Future Study

This paper presents the argument that while research supports that the experiential exercise is beneficial to student learning, there is a little research regarding the experiential exercise and facilitator learning. Therefore this paper takes the first step in opening the door to future research on the topic of experiential exercises and facilitator learning. The underlying core of this paper calls for professors to learn more about how to best prepare future generations of managers. There are many research opportunities for testing learning outcomes based on facilitators' experiences with experiential exercises and traditional teaching methods. Since this area has not yet been explored, grounded theory research is recommended (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory research using qualitative methods such as the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), depth interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), purposive theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) may yield new, theoretically grounded insights. Qualitative analysis has been used as a method of inquiry when quantitative tools have not yet been developed on topics such as interpersonal sensitive behavior (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008) and negative voice effects (Potter, 2006).

Conclusion

An experiential exercise is a learning opportunity for both the student and the professor. I have used experiential exercises in the classroom for over ten years and it is my hope that my experience can be helpful to you. As a note, my experience with experiential exercises has resulted in the vast majority of them being successful and enjoyable. In addition, the success is not attributable to any measure of expertise, but rather to a willingness to be open to learning and grasping Experiential Learning Theory. My recommendation is that professors add experiential exercises to their teaching repertoire. This paper has demonstrates how the professor can use preparation and student feedback to enhance successful implementation of the experiential exercise. In addition, the professor is encouraged to reflect upon the experience; think about how the exercise contributed to student learning; modify the exercise if necessary and continue to incorporate experiential activities into the classroom. Students will be given an

opportunity to learn about management concepts in an active rather than passive manner. Moreover, professors are allowed an opportunity to learn as they experience the experiential exercise.

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