CHANGING ENGLISH TEACHING ERA IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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Abstract: *Experiential Learning (EL) has become one of a modern method implemented in ELT contexts. The use of this method has benefited both English teachers and learners in some contexts. EL method is implemented based on learners` experiences. The experiences can lead the learners to a practical knowledge that is needed for their future teaching experiences. To sum up, EL method covers all aspects of teaching and learning.*

Keywords: Experiential learning, Higher education, experiences

Introduction

Experiences are needed by learners to promote their teaching and learning knowledge. Experiences in language teaching has changed the way teachers view English learning. First, there has been a dramatic change in our conception of learning. We have moved away from behaviorist notions of teachers as purveyors of knowledge and learners as passive receivers. Current cognitive, humanistic, social, and constructivist learning models stress the importance of meaning formation. Therefore, models of good practice in adult education must utilize leamers' previous experiences in order to enhance their current and future learning.

Second, in the last few decades, higher education has experienced an unprecedented influx of adult learners. Adult learners bring to the learning setting a wealth of prior experience and are eager to draw upon their background and previous learning in the classroom. Responsive teachers are able to capitalize on the prior experience of their students as a catalyst for new learning.

Third, in today's rapidly changing environment there is an increased demand for flexibility and the capacity to leverage previous knowledge and experience in new and different ways. Educators are being held accountable for what learners know and are able to do. Experiential approaches appear to be more effective in developing skills that employers seek, such as communication skills, the ability to work in teams, and workplace literacy (Lewis and William, 1994).

Dewey stressed that the creation of new knowledge or the transformation of oneself through learning to perform new roles was more fundamental than simply learning how to do something. Such ongoing meaning-making over time leads to learning to learn experientially (Dewey in Lewis & William, 1994).

Discussion

Before discussing the components involved in either or both definitions, it will be beneficial to discuss the overall experiential learning task structure proposed by Wolfe and Byrne (1975). They state that experientially-based approaches involve four phases: design, conduct, evaluation, and feedback. **Design.** This phase involves the upfront efforts by the instructor to set the stage for the experience. Included in this phase are the specification of learning objectives, the production or selection of activities for participants, the identification of factors affecting student learning, and the creation of a scheme for implementation. Thus, this phase is critical for the "applied" part of applied experiential learning; the theoretical base is laid so that the participant can view the experience in the desired context.

Conduct. This phase involves maintaining and controlling the design. The design phase may include the creation of a timetable for the experience, but the conduct phase involves the altering of the original timetable and activities to sustain a favorable learning environment. The important implication of this phase is that the experience is a structured and closely-monitored one.

Evaluation

To be sure, evaluation is conducted by the instructor. But the emphasis here by Wolfe and Byrne is on the provision of opportunities for students to evaluate the experience. Participants should be able to articulate and demonstrate specific learning gained from the design and conduct of the experience.

Feedback

Wolfe and Byrne point out that feedback should be an almost continuous process from the pre-experience introduction through the final debriefing. Included is the monitoring of the process by the instructor in order to foster positive

aspects and eliminate those features that are negative. One possible concern in this phase is whether students should have the opportunity to fail. To the extent that we learn from our errors, the freedom to fail may be encouraged. On the other hand, if the experiential exercise involves a business client (such as in a small business case), failure can affect the business school's reputation negatively.

Applied

The design phase of the experience is critical. Experiences occurring without guidance and adequate academic preparation may yield little insight into the general processes taking place. The Task stated that experiences will not qualify as applied experiential learning without having the expected educational outcomes articulated and related to the curriculum.

Participative

The student must be involved in the process. Experiential learning is active rather than passive. Rather than just listening to a lecture, students do role plays, or make decisions (as in a simulation game), or performance analysis of a firm's problems (as in a small business case project).

Interactive

The interaction involves more than just the instructor/student. Student/student, student/client, or student/environment interaction is also required. Example interactions include group decision-making in a simulation game, presentations to clients in small business case projects, and conducting survey research of local households for a marketing research course project.

Whole-person emphasis

Experiential learning can involve learning on the behavioral and affective dimensions as well as the cognitive dimension. Given the problem-solving orientation of most management

education, there is a natural tendency among business faculty to emphasize the cognitive dimension. Given the importance of "people skills" and "technical skills" though, the broader horizons offered by experiential learning approaches (as compared to more traditional teaching methods such as lectures and class discussion) may be very beneficial.

Contact with the Environment

The term "experience" implies a real world contact (or at least a "real-world-like") contact. The real or simulated experience makes possible learning through interaction with one's environment. The person X situation interaction is itself crucial. Students should be provided with a variety of situations. Also it should be noted that different students will react quite differently to the same situational cue, and that the interaction process should be monitored closely.

Variability and Uncertainty

One of the benefits which they cite for experiential learning is that students get a feel for the "messiness" and ambiguity associated with real-world situations. It may be enlightening to a student to listen to a lecture on organizational conflict; however, when it is encountered in the team play of a simulation game and there is no one with the authority to reconcile the opposing views, the messiness associated with organizational conflict becomes very real.

Structured Exercise

The experience should be structured and monitored. If there is insufficient autonomy, the willingness to participate may be greatly stifled. On the other hand, if there is no guidance provided, the experience may be largely meaningless in terms of the specific content area for which the instructor is responsible. Faculty time commitments to teaching usually increase (and increase

substantially) rather than decrease when students become more participative in and out of class. An "experience" by itself will not insure learning; the instructor has to insure that it is a quality experience.

Student Evaluation of the Experience

Students need to have the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and feelings as to what the experience is involving. Even though the instructor is monitoring the experience, the important perceptions of what is happening reside within the student. Accordingly these perceptions must be understood and articulated by the student. The design of even highly structured experiential exercises such as simulation games and role plays is often dynamic in nature, as the designer modifies the exercise upon receiving feedback as to what is perceived by the participant to be happening as opposed to what the designer "objectively" perceives to be happening. A good measure of students' ability to integrate content and process is to have them critique the experience by specifying what should have occurred in the experience as opposed to what was actually involved.

Feedback

We do not always learn well from experience. George Bernard Shaw once stated that "we learn from experience that we never learn from experience." To the extent that we learn by "trial and error," the learning is essentially inductive in nature. We experience certain situations and we generalize rules to explain what happened.

Experiential learning occurs when someone engages in an activity, looks back at the activity critically, gains some useful insight from the analysis, and changes behavior in accordance with the results. Of course, this process is experienced spontaneously in everyone's ordinary life. People never stop learning; with each new experience, we consciously or unconsciously ask ourselves questions

such as the following: “How did that feel?,” “What really happened?,” or “What do I need to remember about that?” It is an inductive process, i.e., proceeding from observation rather than from a priori “truth” (as in the deductive process). Learning can be defined as change in behavior as a result of experience or input, which is usually the purpose of training. The effectiveness of experiential learning is based on the fact that nothing is more relevant to us than ourselves. Someone’s own reactions to, observations about, and understanding of something are more important than someone else’s opinion about it. Research has shown that people learn best by doing. People remember best what they know rather than what they know about.

Experiencing occurs naturally in all life situations. In the training setting, participants are exposed to a particular type of experience. This initial stage is the data-generating part of a structured experience. It is the step that so often is associated with games or fun. Obviously, if the process stops after this stage, all learning is left to chance, and the facilitator has not completed the task. Almost any activity that involves either self-assessment or interpersonal interaction can be used as the “doing” part of experiential learning. The following are common activities: Creating models; Confronting issues; Solving problems or sharing; Negotiating or bargaining; information; Planning; Giving and receiving feedback; Collaborating; Communicating; Writing; and Analyzing materials; Role playing.

It is important to note that the objectives of structured experiences must be general and stated in terms such as “to explore,” “to examine,” “to study,” “to identify,” etc. Inductive learning means learning through discovery, and the *exact* things to be learned cannot be specified beforehand. All participants need to do in this stage of the learning cycle is to develop a common framework for the

discussion that follows. This means that whatever happens during the activity, whether expected or not, becomes the basis for critical analysis.

The second stage of the cycle is roughly analogous to inputting data, in data-processing terms. People have experienced an activity and now they presumably are ready to share what they observed and/or how they felt during the event. The intent is to let all participants share their experiences.

Publishing can be carried out through unstructured discussion, but this requires that the facilitator be absolutely clear about the differences in the steps of the learning cycle and distinguish sharply among interventions in the discussion. For example, during the publishing phase, it is important to stick to sharing feelings and other reactions and observations and not to allow some participants to skip ahead to generalizing—inferring principles from what happened. Conversely, some group members' energies may be focused on the completed activity, and they need to be nudged into separating themselves from it in order to learn. Structured techniques such as those previously listed make the transition from stage one to stage two cleaner and easier. That, after all, is the job of the facilitator, i.e., to create clarity and transition with ease.

This stage can be thought of as the fulcrum or the pivotal step in experiential learning. It is the *systematic* examination of the participants' commonly shared experiences. During this stage, participants attempt to answer the question "What actually happened?" This is the group dynamics phase of the cycle, in which participants essentially reconstruct the patterns and interactions of the activity from their reports. This "talking through" part of the cycle is critical, and it cannot be either ignored or designed spontaneously if useful learning is to occur. The facilitator needs to plan carefully how the processing will be carried out and focused toward the next stage—generalizing. Participants may

perceive unprocessed data as unfinished business, which can distract them from further learning.

This step should be thoroughly worked through before going on to the next. Participants should be led to look at what happened in terms of group dynamics and behavioral trends, but not in terms of meaning. What occurred was real, of course, but it was also artificially contrived by the structure of the activity. It is important to keep in mind that being aware of the activity dynamics is critical for learning about human relations outside the training setting. Participants often anticipate the next step of the learning cycle and make premature generalizations. The facilitator needs to make certain that the processing has been adequate before moving to the next step.

Once the processing step is done, participants are ready (and should be encouraged) to say goodbye to the content of the structured activity and to focus on learning. This is the point at which learning readiness occurs.

A key concept in experiential learning is that of *pattern.* Pattern implies that there is an order to the elements of a situation and that these elements occur with some regularity. Although variations on basic patterns occur because of individual and subcultural differences, they can be understood beyond their differences when seen as a general class of event. The concept of pattern unites previously isolated phenomena. When the arrangement of elements is understood in one situation, this understanding can be generalized and applied to other situations. Much of experiential learning is concerned with bringing one's characteristic styles of interaction into conscious awareness, evaluating them with respect to their utility for

different personal and professional roles, and modifying those particular aspects of one's style that limit effectiveness.

It is useful in this stage for the group interaction to result in a series of products— generalizations that are presented not only orally but also visually. This strategy helps to facilitate participants' learning. The facilitator needs to remain objective about what is learned, drawing out the reactions of others to generalizations that appear incomplete or controversial. In addition, participants sometimes anticipate the final stage of the learning cycle, and they need to continue clarifying what was learned before discussing what changes are needed.

In the generalizing stage, it is possible for the facilitator to bring in theoretical and research findings to augment the learning. If concepts will be taught, this is the time to do it. Introducing cognitive points here can provide a framework for learning. It is important that any input from the trainer be linked directly to the points that participants have generalized. Also, the practice may encourage dependence on the facilitator as the source of knowledge and may lessen commitment to the final stage of the cycle if participants do not feel they own the information—a common phenomenon of *deductive* processes. Typically, less outside input is needed than one who is not familiar with the process may assume.

The final stage of the experiential learning cycle is the purpose for which the whole structured experience is designed. The central question here is "Now what?" The facilitator helps participants to apply generalizations to actual situations in which they are involved. Ignoring such discussion jeopardizes the probability that the learning will be used. It is critical that attention be given to designing ways for individual participants and/or groups to use the learning generated during the structured experience to plan more effective behavior.

Such learning is an everyday part of everyone's life. As long as one's mind is functioning normally, one never stops learning. A major purpose of human

resource development is transferring learning from training programs to one's professional and private lives (NCIC, 2009).

The first context of experiential learning as Smith (2001) described it is the ―sort of learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting‖ (p. 1). This type of experiential learning could naturally align with a contemporary career and technical education and/or agricultural education program, which prepare students for advanced level occupations in the workplace or post-secondary education. Another example might be a workforce education development program with a specific focus on occupationally oriented pragmatic activities where a predetermined level of accuracy is desired. Whatever the educational setting, the important point to remember with this first concept of experiential learning is that it involves a direct experiential encounter with the learning event rather than simply a thought process associated with the learning (Borzak, 1981).

The second context of experiential learning described in the literature addresses students' reflection on direct participation and direct encounters within the events of everyday life (Houle, 1980). This concept of experiential learning presents itself in a less structured format and in some respect aligns with the term ―life-long-learning‖ (see Figure 2). As Smith (2001) noted, this form of experiential learning ―is not sponsored by some formal educational institutions, but by people themselves‖ (p. 1). It represents the idea of learning new things based on the innate variations of life-experiences one attains each day. However there are some structured teaching strategies and activities that call upon this form of experiential learning, which include learning logs/journals and concept mapping to name a few (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) which are as follows:

(a) Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes. To improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning a process that includes feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts. (b) All learning is relearning. Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students‘ beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas. (c) Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process. In the process of learning one is called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking. (d) Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world and not just the result of cognition. Learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving. (e) Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment. (f) Learning is the process of creating knowledge. (p. 194).

Kolb‘s learning styles are briefly defined as follows:

(a) Converging - Abstract Conceptualization and Abstract Experimentation are dominant learning style abilities. Learners that prefer this style tend to excel at finding pragmatic mythologies of working with ideas and theories and are inclined to be good at problem solving and technical tasks, (b) Diverging - Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation are dominant learning style abilities Learners that prefer this style tend perform well in situations that call for generation of ideas (brainstorming). (c) Assimilating - Abstract Conceptualization and Reflective Observation dominant learning abilities Learners that prefer this style tend to excel at understanding and organizing a range of

information and would often times rather work with concepts than people, and (d) Accommodating - Concrete Experimentation and Abstract Experimentation dominant learning abilities Learners that prefer this style tend to excel at hands on learning activities and enjoy completing new experiences and complex tasks (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Conclusion

While there is variation among experiential learning models commonalities also exist between them in that each includes some form of experience, reflection, and application. The student teaching experience, as an example, can be seen as both experience and application depending on the view which one takes at any point in time during the student teaching process. Student teaching could be the application of what was learned in the pre-service coursework. It could also be viewed as another actual experience that should be reflected upon, and learning from that experience, and subsequent reflection, should be applied to future teaching situations.

For the cycle of experiential learning to be unbroken, between experience and future application, a learner needs a valid context in which to reflect upon what has happened in the experience. If the reflection component is omitted, then students are not engaging in theory-based experiential learning and are being denied the opportunity for greater learning through experience. For example, athletic coaches in sports such as football and basketball routinely use film of previous contests to reflect on the performance of the team with and without the team present. The coach will use ―film study‖ to reflect or critique his or her own performance as a coach along with reflecting on the team‘s performance in a film session with the team or with specific team members. In this situation, the learning is consistently experiential since

Kolb‘s four modes are present in the coaching aspect with an emphasis on reflection following each practice or contest (Clark, RW et.al., 2010).

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