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Experiential Learning as an Adjunct to the Basic Course: Student Responses to a Pedagogical Model*

Judith A. Rolls

Since a knowledge of interpersonal or public communication theory does not ensure a student's possession of the requisite communication skills, some form of experiential learning as an adjunct to the basic course is provided at many universities. This often takes the form of classroom games and exercises. This study attempts to assess a unique experiential learning model used since 1976 at the University College of Cape Breton (Nova Scotia, Canada) which requires among other things, regular attendance at a communication lab. Delineating the model's specifications might be useful to others interested in implementing such a facility. This work contains a description of the design and an analysis of student responses to this pedagogical procedure.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MODEL

Both an interpersonal communication and a hybrid course (focusing on interviewing, small group discussion, and public speaking) serve as a basic course in this model. In addition to three hours of class time, students are required to meet in a communication laboratory for one hour per week, earning a

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percentage of their final course grade. In regularly scheduled small groups (five to seven persons per gathering), students engage in videotaped structured learning exercises that complement course theory and/or they practice for upcoming classroom performances. Conducted by the coordinator or a peer facilitator, each lab is goal directed and seemingly unstructured as personnel endeavor to create a safe, relaxed atmosphere where students feel free to express themselves. Like the facility as a whole, these meetings are also referred to as "a lab."

In this model, most classroom presentations are videotaped for later individual student assessment. If possible, the coordinator views these performances with the students and asks probing questions such as, "How do you feel about what you have just seen?" or "What would you do differently if you could do the presentation again?" While the coordinator may help with special problems like articulation, students are encouraged to assess their own performances. This has been an effective practice but as student numbers increase, less time is available for such interactions.

Students also complete question and answer journals in order to help them examine their cognitive, affective, and behavioral development. Outside of scheduled labs, students come to view classroom performances, to meet for informal communication apprehension counseling, to arrange for missed labs, or just to say "hello."

The lab is truly the pulse of the basic course and the communication department in that its commonality to each section binds both students and instructors. Functioning full time and headed by a coordinator, the facility consists of a 9X20 foot central room, a coordinator's office, two practice rooms, and a room designed specifically for viewing taped classroom presentations. It houses state of the art audiovisual equipment and serves about three hundred students per semester.

The coordinator is responsible for the daily operation of the facility. This includes scheduling (at the onset of each semester) some 300 students into approximately forty-four weekly lab slots, arranging for ten to twelve peer facilitators to conduct the lab activities, and coordinating equipment and operators for approximately 12 sections of the basic course. She also compiles payroll information, distributes pay checks, maintains and orders all audiovisual equipment, and addresses space needs. It is clear that the effective functioning of the lab depends almost entirely on the competent management by its coordinator. Choosing appropriate personnel for this role is vital to the success of the operation.

SELECTING, TRAINING, AND APPRAISING PEER FACILITATORS

In addition, the coordinator selects, trains, and appraises peer facilitators. To qualify, students must possess a knowledge of communication (indicated by completing twelve credit hours in the discipline) and display superior interpersonal, leadership, and language skills. Interpersonal competence is rated on the applicant's demonstration of supportiveness, empathy, self disclosure, self-confidence, open-mindedness, and sensitivity to gender issues. Leadership aptitude is judged on whether the contender is perceived to be trustworthy, dependable, and to possess organizational, instrumental, and group maintenance skills. Language proficiency is estimated on the effective use of grammatical and verbal codes.

Approximately one to four new peer facilitators are prepared each year. Training takes place in the lab by the coordinator who reviews duties, expectations, and regulations and is assisted by a seasoned facilitator who shares his or her experiences. Having taken both basic courses as prerequisites for upper level ones, facilitators come equipped with a knowledge of the goals and structure of the lab. Subsequently, training focuses on how peer facilitators can best meet stu-

dent needs. Training is essentially ongoing during weekly meetings where upcoming lesson plans are reviewed and problems encountered by facilitators are discussed. Facilitators receive a file containing a master lab schedule, tentative lesson plans, journals, journal assessment forms, lab/peer facilitator evaluation forms, and other miscellaneous documentation.

One month into the semester, new peer facilitators are appraised by the coordinator during a supportive interview. The facilitator's expressed strengths and weaknesses are discussed and those who are encountering difficulties may choose to conduct fewer labs. Many of the facilitators plan to pursue graduate study and regard this instructive role as a prerequisite for attaining a teaching assistantship. Thus, they have typically been effective and responsible. The coordinator's aptitude for skillfully selecting and managing people also attributes to the success experienced in this area.

ASSESSING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND STUDENT JOURNALS.

Experiential Learning Assessment

Experiential learning grades are assigned by the facilitator of the particular lab. Points are awarded on the basis of the student's general attitude, willingness to participate, group member sensitivity, and skill improvement. A systematic evaluation form (See Appendix 1 and 2.) developed by the coordinator is used to assess the lab performances. Rated on a weekly basis, grades are recorded and then averaged at the semester's end. To date, this method has not been formally assessed. As literature on grading experiential learning seems relatively scarce, evaluation inadequacies may be rectified by examining the literature addressing communication competency-based assessment (Aitken & Neer, 1992; Hay,

1991; Meadows & Higgins, 1975; Neer, 1990; Rubin, 1982, 1985; Spitzbery & Hurt, 1987; Trank & Steel, 1983).

Student Journal Assessment

The journal is a useful pedagogical tool in that it supplies students with a means of evaluating the experiential learning they have encountered. Three question and answer journals focusing on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components are completed in each basic course. Rolls (1981), in a study examining approaches to journal assessment (analytic, holistic, and primary trait), reported that the analytic approach best indicated a student's mastery of speech communication. Particularly useful for inexperienced graders, the assessment guide suggested by Rolls features a reasonably simple checklist for the completeness of descriptions, the depth of entries, the ability to apply communication principles and concepts, the amount of self disclosure, and specific areas in which work is needed. Space is also provided for holistic comments regarding each of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Adoption of this assessment guide has proven effective.

Although students are provided with descriptive responses to their journal entries, they receive no numerical evaluations until the end of the semester. Upon submission, however, each journal is assigned a recorded grade by the facilitator conducting the particular lab. This procedure is followed by holistic grading by the coordinator in order to test for consistency on the part of the peer facilitators. As with the experiential learning, grades are averaged at the end of the semester thus preventing an end-of-semester grading crunch.

Undergraduates grading undergraduates may be a source of debate in some institutions. Webb and Lane (1986) described how this problem was eliminated at the University of Florida by instituting a credited practicum course titled "Peer

Facilitation." Establishing a similar program might prove valuable in this model.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE MODEL

This model is a viable, practical one that might form a prototype for others seeking such a pedagogical framework. To determine the model's pedagogical viability; that is, to ascertain whether lab attendance, video technology, and journal submissions as adjunctive requirements to the regular course specifications actually help students gain a mastery of speech communication, I examined student responses to this experiential learning model.

A phenomenological approach was adopted for this investigation because in this method of analysis, "attention is given to a particular experience in which the various structures and modes of consciousness that have been synthesized to constitute it are analyzed and descriptively explained" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 205). The research methodology employed in this study utilized qualitative data from two forms of personal documents - student journals and lab/facilitator evaluation forms. Regarding the use of personal documents, Bogdan and Taylor (1975) note that "whether used as autonomous sources of understanding or as resources from which hypotheses can be generated, personal documents permit us to study facets of people, events, and settings which are not directly observable" (p. 6). The narratives contained in the personal documents allowed me to construct and gain an understanding of students' lived experiences of this pedagogical model.

Lab/Facilitator Evaluation Forms

Sixty-six interpersonal and forty-eight hybrid evaluations completed over a three year period and that evaluated labs facilitated by the coordinator and by some seventeen different peer facilitators were analyzed. As pertinent information is

often contained in written comments, I used the responses to a question inviting suggestions, criticisms, or recommendations regarding the lab and/or the peer facilitators as the data base for a content analysis to assess the model's effectiveness. Since the major goal of the model is to promote proficiency in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains, I used these denominations, along with "lab/facilitator," for the analytic schema. The results of this investigation lead me to believe that the lab encounter is a useful one in that it effectively promotes experiential learning. The following are specific examples of how learning takes place.

Cognitive Domain

Most comments from the interpersonal course may be classified as content based. For instance, many students expressed that as a result of either the small group discussions or the illustrative exercises and simulations, they were better able to understand and grasp difficult concepts. Others noted that the lab experience reinforced course theory and terminology. As one student put it,

"The lab was helpful in that I was able to recognize terms from class which were explained again. This improved my understanding of the course material."

While few comments from the hybrid course were coded under this dimension, some students noted that they actually learned how to structure speeches and what was expected of them in class performances.

Affective Domain

Overwhelmingly, in both the interpersonal and the hybrid courses, students reported that they enjoyed the lab. Of the fifty-three statements coded under this dimension, 23 contained the word/s "enjoy," "enjoyed," or "enjoyable." "Comfort-

able" was the second most used descriptor. "Relaxed," "encouraging," "welcome," "favorite," and "fun" were other frequently used expressions. This suggests that students were receptive to the experiential learning approach and cooperated in its effort. Specific to the interpersonal course, comments attested to personal growth or improved self-esteem.

"I found Kara made labs very enjoyable and would make me feel more at ease, especially through the self-conscious times. She was good at building self-esteem at these times."

"I believe that it helped me to look inside myself and I learned plenty of things about me and who I am."

Behavioral Domain

In the interpersonal course, reflections seemed to suggest a heightened awareness of the visual, vocal, and verbal extent of communication. Remarks like the following were common.

"Some experiences in the lab were quite helpful to show areas you needed to work on."

"The lab made me more aware of my actions when [I was] in social interaction. I can now notice my mistakes and correct them at a given time. Before coming to the lab I was completely ignorant about the flaws in my speech, tone, and actions. Now they can be replaced with better ones."

"It was very difficult to actually see yourself on the video and recognize personal quirks, mannerisms, etc."

Another stream of comments clustered around interpersonal improvement. These are but a few examples. "

The lab really brought me out of my shell. All my friends and family notice a difference in my speech and my shyness."

"The lab helped me to communicate more openly with people."

Students in the hybrid course concentrated their remarks on their communication strengths and weaknesses and/or on the practice for graded presentations. The most commonly used descriptor was "helpful." Overall, they seemed to find that the lab experience definitely attributed to success in the classroom. The next entries illustrate this.

"It was helpful in getting me ready for our speeches and interviews — the on camera work was intimidating at first but it was most helpful to play back the tapes."

"It was good in that I got a chance to practice making presentations before actually making them in front of the class."

"It shows you where your strong and weak points are before you do your actual speech."

A review of student testimony contained in the evaluation forms suggests that the model is effective. Course content is reinforced, communication strengths and weaknesses become distinguishable, and students in the hybrid course find the videotaped preparation for class presentations particularly beneficial. Reported too are personal growth and greater sensitivity toward themselves and others as communicators.

STUDENT JOURNALS

Content contained in communication journals were also used as a data source to assess the model's effectiveness. Pupils identify concepts/theories important to them, describe feelings they have experienced, and try to assess their strengths and weaknesses in each of the visual, vocal, and verbal areas. Twenty interpersonal journals were analyzed by dividing the narratives into seven conceptual schema categories: cognitive, affective, behavioral, cognitive/affective,

cognitive/behavioral, affective/behavioral, and cognitive/affective/behavioral.

If an indication of learning is assessed on the basis of testimonial evidence, then the model is clearly an effective one. Statements such as "allowed me to see," "gained a stronger understanding," "developed an awareness," "became more aware," "helped me to learn," "am more cognizant," "have noticed," "realized," and combinations thereof, were consistently used in entries coded under the cognitive categories (cognitive, cognitive/affective, cognitive/behavioral). Some of the topics targeted were self-concept, nonverbal communication, relationships, listening, social comparison, and conflict. The following excerpt was typical of several entries.

"The lab experience where the couple acted out either good or bad communication allowed me to see how ineffective arguing and shouting are and how calmness and politeness are wonderful aspects of communication. Nonverbal communication plays a large and important part in relaying messages. Tone of voice and facial expressions are two that determined if the communication was perceived positively or negatively in this situation."

What became particularly clear was the interrelationship among the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains in the experiential learning process. Competent communicators are often high self-monitors and modify their communication style to meet contextual demands. Entries coded under this category illustrated this pattern. Many students indicated that they had gained (a) an understanding of themselves as communicators, (b) a sensitivity toward others, and (c) an insight into their communication strengths and weaknesses. Students talked about feeling more confident in initiating conversations and attributed this to being cognizant of the tools of effective communication.

"After studying the chapter on body language I have become more aware of the nonverbal reaction of others toward my communication. This combined with my understanding of

empathy has made me become a more sensitive communicator."

Fear and nervousness were commonly expressed themes in the affective dimension. Many disclosed their apprehension of communicating in the classroom or in front of the video camera. Such comments were often followed by more positive remarks.

"The most helpful activity we did last week in the lab was when we were videotaped. I felt nervous about doing the three minute talk. However, when I viewed the playback, the nervousness I felt didn't show."

Improvement was typically referred to in entries coded under the behavioral dimension. Listening, communication skills in general, and attentiveness to others were noted most often. For instance,

"I feel that my communication skills have improved a great deal since I started this program. I find it much easier to relate to people when I'm talking to them. I find I am able to listen better and not just to what people are saying but also to what they mean when they say it."

Finally, thirty journals from the hybrid course were examined. These are more event specific in that students respond after completing their classroom performances — the interview, the group presentation, and the speech. Again the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions served as the analytic schema. Due to content specific questions, less insight into the effectiveness of the model was provided. Some information was gleaned, however, from the speech event journal which asked respondents to compare perceptions of their performance with the actual videotaped production. Most proclaimed that their speech was better than anticipated. The following is typical.

"After I delivered my speech, I felt it had been a failure. However, after viewing it, I found that the opposite was

true. I don't think it will go down as one of the great orations in history but I was surprisingly pleased."

If given the opportunity to repeat their speech, most students said they would calm down.

While the hybrid journals were less informative, the interpersonal journal documentation of student's lived experiences of the communication lab further substantiate the viability of this model. It is clear from the narratives that students learned to integrate concepts at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. Use of the video played a major role in this endeavor and this too was echoed in the lab/facilitator evaluation forms. Quigley and Nyquist (1992) make a strong argument for the use of video technology to provide feedback to students in performance courses. They assert that it provides the opportunity to adopt a role similar to that of observer, to identify or emphasize particular skills, and to compare different performances both with one's own and with others. This model confirms their stance.

CONCLUSIONS

This experiential learning design is a practical one. Due in great part to the coordinator's individual skills, it underscores the importance of personnel in the success of such a model. For instance, the coordinator's role demands a practical, organized, responsible person who displays socio-emotional sensitivity toward peer facilitators, students, and professors alike and who possesses the ability to recognize these qualities in potential peer facilitators. To realize satisfactory results, professors too must support the lab's philosophy by standardizing and synchronizing course content and graded classroom presentations with the lab's exercises. Finally, peer facilitators who contribute immensely to the process, must be dependable, mature, and adept facilitator/trainers.

Not only is the model workable, it is effective. Students report that they enjoy the lab experience, find that course

content is reinforced, gain insight into their communication strengths and weaknesses, become more sensitive communicators, and make better classroom presentations. Communication scholars interested in meeting both the theoretical and practical needs of students in the basic course may wish to develop a similar program at their university.

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APPENDIX 1

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EVALUATION FORM FOR INTERPERSONAL BASIS COURSE

Name: _____ Peer Facilitator: _____

Lab Number: _____ Course Section Number _____

Cognitive Domain

Has the student demonstrated an aptitude in the area of interpersonal communication theory? Explain in terms of the following:

A) Ability to understand the purpose of the lab exercises.
Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Comments:

B) Ability to adopt new communication vocabulary.
Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Comments:

C) Ability to relate concepts with personal experiences as revealed through lab groups.

Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Comments:

Additional Comments:

Overall Rating of Student's Ability in this area: _____ %

Affective Domain

A) Has the student demonstrated an acceptable attitude throughout the semester? (Committed, Concerned, Creative, Eager, Excited, Involved, Lively, Uninvolved, etc.)

Comments:

- B) Describe the student's interaction with lab members. (Supportive, Friendly, Uncaring, Unfriendly, Little interaction, etc.)**

Comments:

- C) Has the student's level of confidence changed? More Confident Less Confident No Change**

Comments:

Additional Comments:

Overall Rating of Student's Ability in this area: _____%

Behavioral Domain

How has the student behaved throughout the semester? Explain in terms of the following:

- A) Willingness to attend and participate in all labs.
Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong**

Comments:

- B) Contribution to the successful execution of lab exercises.
Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong**

Comments:

- C) Overall behavior.
Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong**

Additional Comments:

Overall Rating of Student's Ability in this area: _____%

Suggested Total Overall Rating: _____

APPENDIX 2

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EVALUATION FORM FOR HYBRID BASIC COURSE

Name: _____ Peer Facilitator: _____

Lab Number: _____ Course Section Number _____

Cognitive Domain

Has the student demonstrated an aptitude in the area of communication practicum theory? Explain in terms of the following:

- A) Ability to understand the purpose of the lab exercises.
 Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Comments:

- B) Ability to understand theory as it applies to:

Interviewing

Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Group Discussion

Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Speeches

Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Comments:

Additional Comments:

Overall Rating of Student's Ability in this area: _____ %

Affective Domain

- A) Has the student demonstrated an acceptable attitude throughout the semester? (Committed, Concerned, Creative, Eager, Excited, Involved, Lively, Uninvolved, etc.)

Comments:

B) Describe the student's interaction with lab members.
(Supportive, Friendly, Uncaring, Unfriendly, Little Interaction, etc.)

Comments:

C) Has the student's level of confidence changed?
More Confident Less Confident No Change

Comments:

(D) What is the student's general attitude toward the lab experience?

Positive Neutral Negative

Comments:

Additional Comments:

Overall Rating of Student's Ability in this area: _____%

Behavioral Domain

How has the student behaved throughout the semester?
Explain in terms of the following:

A) Willingness to attend and participate in all labs. Very
Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Comments:

B) Contribution to the successful execution of lab exercises.
Very Weak Weak Fair Strong Very Strong

Comments:

C) Overall behavior:
Cohesive Demonstrates Leadership Remote
Inhibited or Shy

Comments:

Additional Comments:

Overall Rating of Student's Ability in this area: _____ %

Suggested Total Overall Rating _____