

Cross-Disciplinary Faculty Perspectives On Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

An on-line survey was conducted among a university's department chairs in an effort to gain perspective on university-wide use of Experiential Learning (EL). While there were differences in cross-disciplinary definitions and perspectives regarding EL, ninety-one per cent of 35 department chairs indicated their department made use of EL with greatest use during the junior and senior years. EL is defined generally as a hands-on experience and/or learning by doing while cognitive activity, such as observation and reflection, is included in the definition by a third of the chairs. Eighty-eight per cent of the chairs believe students view EL as either "very beneficial" or "beneficial".

Keywords: Experiential Learning; Action Learning; Pedagogy; Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Scholars extending from Aristotle, who said, "What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing," and Confucius, who observed that "I see and I remember, I do and I understand" (Koo, 1999), to contemporary educators and psychologists, have long emphasized the pedagogical merits of experiential learning or "learning by doing," hereafter referred to as EL.

John Dewey, the towering giant of educational philosophy in the past century and the originator of the practice of student teaching, emerged as an influential crusader, who emphasized the critical importance of EL as a pedagogical tool (Dewey, 1915, 1916, 1938). His influence upon subsequent generations of educators has been profound (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; President's Commission, 2001).

Today most business and professional institutions take cognizance of the importance of EL via training workshops and similar programs, designed to insure "on-the-job" competency (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Vicere & Fulmer, 1998). Educators in fields such as education, medicine, and law, all have institutionalized EL in the form of student teaching, internships, clerkships and the like. However, other traditional fields of study have been slow to embrace EL in their curricula and many do not embrace the practice at all.

Adelphi University, recognizing the importance of EL, has facilitated its incorporation into many degree programs. The professional schools of Education, Nursing, Psychology and Social Work already enjoy a long history of EL. Over the past six years, its Business School has initiated a program of selective implementation and research with a form of EL referred to as "Action Learning" (Rosenstein, Gupta & Ashley, 2004; Gupta, Ashley & Rosenstein, 2005; Rosenstein, Gupta & Ashley, 2006; Rosenstein, Ashley, Gupta & Ulin (2008).

In an effort to gain additional perspective regarding the university-wide employment of EL, the university created a task force to study the issue. This article summarizes the results of an on-line survey conducted among all department Chairs, in order to assess cross-disciplinary perceptions, attitudes, and use of EL across the university.

METHOD

The on-line survey administered to all of the university’s 36 department chairs & program heads, elicited responses from 35, for a 97.2% completion rate.

Programs/Departments that responded to the survey:

- Anthropology
- Art and Art History
- Biology
- Business--3
- Center for Career Development
- Center For International Education
- Communication Sciences and Disorders/Speech and Hearing Center
- Communications
- Curriculum and Instruction--2
- Dance
- Derner Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology
- Derner Institute for Advanced Psychological Studies
- Early Childhood Education and Special Education
- English
- Environmental Studies
- Health, Physical Education & Human Performance
- Honors College
- Languages and International Studies
- LGS
- Management
- Marketing
- Nursing
- Office of School and Community Partnerships
- Political Science
- School Psychology
- Social Work
- Social Work [graduate]
- Social Work [BSW]
- Sociology
- Special Education Program
- University College

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FINDINGS

The responses to following nine questions, with accompanying comments, summarize the major survey findings.

I. Define Experiential Learning as it applies to your curriculum:

	Base = 35	Number	Percentage *
1. Learning by doing/Hands on (general)		18	51 %
Internship		7	20 %
Laboratory		3	9 %
Field		1	3 %
Net = those who cited at least one of the above		<u>28</u>	<u>80 %</u>
2. Cognitive Experience (Reflection/Observation)		<u>10</u>	<u>29 %</u>
3. Real World Experience (General)		<u>2</u>	<u>6 %</u>

* Multiple mentions permitted

Comments:

- i. Roughly 4 out of 5 define experiential learning in terms of learning-by-doing activities.
- ii. Roughly 3 out of 10 (also or alternatively) define it in terms of cognitive activities such as observation and/or reflection.

II. What is the purpose of Experiential Learning?

	Base = 35	Number	Percentage *
1. Learning by doing/Hands on (general)		7	20 %
Provide Practical Application		8	23 %
Increase Skills		2	6 %
Net = those who cited at least one of the above		<u>16</u>	<u>46 %</u>
2. Increase Understanding		<u>11</u>	<u>31 %</u>
3. Provide Real World Experience		<u>6</u>	<u>17 %</u>
4. Development and Growth		<u>5</u>	<u>14 %</u>
5. Connect to Real World		<u>2</u>	<u>6 %</u>
6. Confirm Career		<u>1</u>	<u>3 %</u>

Comments:

- i. Close to one-half say the purpose is to provide hands on experience.
- ii. Roughly one-third say purpose is to increase understanding.

III. Is Experiential Learning part of your curriculum?

	Base = 34	Number	Percentage
Yes		31	91 %
No		3	9 %

Comments:

- i. The vast majority say they provide Experiential Learning.

IV. When do students participate in Experiential Learning?

	Base = 32	Number	Percentage
Freshman Year		16	50 %
Sophomore Year		18	56 %
Junior Year		24	75 %
Senior Year		24	75 %
Graduate School		22	67 %

Comments:

- i. Experiential Learning occurs in all years, with greatest emphasis in the Junior and Senior years.
- ii.

V. Description of Experiential Learning activities in the curriculum:

	Base = 30	Number	Percentage*
1. Learning by doing (general)		12	34 %
Field/Laboratory		12	34 %
Internship		4	11 %
Application of knowledge		2	5 %
Net = those who cited at least one of the above		<u>23</u>	<u>66 %</u>
2. Cognitive activities (Reflection/Observation)		<u>8</u>	<u>23 %</u>
3. Case Studies		<u>1</u>	<u>3 %</u>

Comments:

- i. Roughly two-thirds provide activities involving learning by doing.
- ii. Roughly one-fourth provide cognitive activities.

VI. Do you assess Experiential Learning in your program?

	Base = 29	Number	Percentage
Yes		22	76 %
No		7	24 %

Comments:

- i. Roughly three-fourths say they assess EL in their program.

VII. Who conducts the assessment?

	Base = 26	Number	Percentage*
Faculty		23	84 %
Students		8	31 %
Chair/Director		12	46 %

Comments:

- i. Assessment is primarily conducted by faculty and chairs/directors.
- ii. Roughly one-third have students participate in assessment.

VIII. Chairs' opinion of students' reactions to Experiential Learning:

	Base = 32	Number	Percentage
Very Beneficial		20	63 %
Beneficial		8	25 %
Neutral		2	6 %
Not Beneficial		0	0 %
Very Unbeneficial		2	6 %

Comments:

- i. Roughly 9 out of 10 believe students view EL as very beneficial or beneficial.

IX. Description of impact of Experiential Learning on students:

	Base = 32	Number	Percentage
Didn't Assess		17	53 %
Appreciate/Happy		11	34 %
Increase Skills		7	22 %
Increase Understanding		7	22 %
Gained Employment		2	6 %
Confirmed Career Path		1	3 %

Comments:

- i. Although three-fourths claimed to assess programs, roughly half did not provide any feedback on assessment.
- ii. One-third said students appreciated or were happy about their experiential learning experience.
- iii. One-fifth said experiential learning increased skills.
- iv. One-fifth said experiential learning increased understanding.

DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly, EL is generally defined (by 80%), as a hands-on experience and/or learning by doing. In addition, cognitive activity, such as observation and reflection, is (also) included in the definition by a third of the chairs. Perhaps the most unanticipated finding regards the wide-spread use (91%) of EL, as defined by the faculty. It is used throughout the school experience, with greatest use during the junior and senior years (75%). Close to nine out of ten (88%) chairs believe students view EL to be either “very beneficial” or “beneficial.” However, only half provided any feedback on EL assessment and the procedures used apparently varied greatly. While the widespread use and favorable opinion of EL among department chairs underscores its apparent value as a pedagogical tool, the findings suggest a need for more systematic assessment and perhaps further investigation of how EL might be best applied in the individual academic disciplines.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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