Experiential learning: empowering students to take control of their learning by engaging them in an interactive course simulation environment

Elena Marin*

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Mihail Kogălniceanu St., nr.36-46, Bucharest 5

Abstract

Engaging students in an interactive course simulation and giving them the responsibility to design and implement a lesson plan can be viewed as a way to empower students to take control of their own learning process. The aim of this paper is to present the results of a study in which second year students from the Educational Science department were engaged in an interactive lecture, which consisted of designing and implementing a teaching activity. All in all, we want to bring into discussion the importance of creating, among students, a sense of ownership over their own learning.

Keywords: initial teacher training; experiential learning.

* Elena Marin. Tel.: +0766 196 581; E-mail address: elena.marin@fpse.unibuc.ro
1. Experiential learning – the key to 21st learning

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, p. 41).

The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience -- Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) -- and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience -- Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). According to the four-stage learning cycle immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences. (Sternberg, 2000)

According to Vince and Reynolds, experiential learning is having a revival. In addition, they state that experiential learning has long been an important, although by no means dominant, part of our educational approach. In general, management education in business and management schools is delivered through traditional, didactic approaches, sometimes with group work attached, and sometimes not. (Reynolds & Vince, 2007) The authors mentioned before agree that we have been aware for some time of a new interest in the potential of experiential learning, particularly as a way of developing the practice of critical management education. (op. cit.)

Moreover, the Association for Experiential Education published a set of principles that stated the following:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis;
- Experiences are structured to require the student to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results;
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the student is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative and constructing meaning;
- Students are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic;
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning;
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: student to self, student to others and student to the world at large;
- The instructor and student may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because the outcomes of the experience cannot totally be predicted;
- Opportunities are nurtured for students and instructors to explore and examine their own values;
- The instructor’s primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting students, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process;
- The instructor recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning;
- The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning;
- Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the learner;
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes. (Association for Experiential Education, 2011, paragraph 4)

1. How to develop meaningful learning - the case of 2nd year students enrolled in a teaching training programme

1.1 Methodology

Second year students were asked to develop and then held an interactive course, based on a topic related to one of the sixth classroom management dimensions (Iucu, 2006). In this present study only five out of six dimensions
were taken into consideration. The five dimensions are ergonomic dimension, social dimension, psychological
dimension, classroom rules and regulations dimension and the last dimension focuses on ways to apply classroom
rules and regulations. The purpose of this study is not based on the course itself, but on the acquisition of a certain
set of abilities that students need to acquire in order to feel confident and to develop a sense of ownership of their
own learning.

1.2 Research Design

The research design consist on the administration of a questionnaire that 2nd year students received. All students
attended a course on classroom management. The lecture on classroom management was structured in an interactive
way where students, on their first lectures, had to assist to an introduction into the classroom management field, then
they were invited, under teacher’s supervision and guidance, to find out more about the fifth classroom dimensions,
such as ergonomic dimension, social dimension, psychological dimension, classroom rules and regulations
dimension and the last dimension focuses on ways to apply classroom rules and regulations. After the students found
out more about these five classroom dimensions they were required to work in groups of ten, in order to design a
lesson plan that later they have to implement, by sustaining a teaching activity having as students their own
classmates. Students had a week to meet and discuss, within the groups (homogeneous groups), about the designing
of the lesson. All groups had to choose a leader, but all students within the group had different tasks to fulfill. At the
end of this week of practice all students were required to write the tasks they have managed to do. If in the designing
of the lesson plan all members of a team had equal responsibilities, when it came to make the decision of who will
speaking in public, by presenting the topic, students decisions varied. Some groups decided to give all members a
time on their own to be in front of the class, present and interact to the audience, meanwhile other groups thought
that it was better to choose only one member to present, while other member of the group helped with the
distribution of materials needed at a certain time during the class.

All students were required to participate in this learning simulation and they had to express their own ideas about
this form of lecture by writing a reflection journal based on their own experience.

Starting from this assumption, we focused on discovering students’ opinions about this form of lecture, and
finding the advantages and disadvantage of this type of lecture, viewed as an experiential learning perspective. We
also want to emphasize the challenges, of not only preparing a teaching activity, but also to work in groups of ten,
taking into consideration the advantages and disadvantages of working in groups.

1.3 Instrument

A quantitative approach was chosen for this investigation. This quantitative approach was specifically chosen to
enable collecting information from students. A number of 42 students were involved in this study. They were asked
to answer a questionnaire, which consist of 7 questions, 2 open questions and 5 multiple answer. The data provided
by this research was analyzed by frequency analysis using SPSS.

2. The Results of the Study

The results are based on a certain set of abilities, which were followed through the process of student’s teaching
experience. The following abilities were adapted form Kolb’s proposal. He states that in order to gain genuine
knowledge from an experience, certain abilities are required:\ the learner must be willing to be actively involved in
the experience; the learner must be able to reflect on the experience; the learner must possess and use analytical
skills to conceptualize the experience; and the learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in
order to use the new ideas gained from the experience.

San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
A main interest of this survey is related to students’ level of involvement in the project developed as part of the training course. As seen in Fig. 1 half of the students involved in this course fell that they were very involved in this project, whereas a total of 96% of students state that they were involved or very involved in the project.

Moreover the students were questioned about if they would have liked to be more involved in this project. Regarding this subject a number of approximately 77% of the students declare that they would like to be more involved into the project. Students declare that they would like to allocate more time to the development of the project or to be more actively involved. Meanwhile a percentage of 33% of the students feel confident on the work that they have done within the group and they declare that they are happy with the involvement level and with the work they have done.

Students’ willingness to take part in similar learning experience whose aim is to design and implement a training course is fairly high. (See Fig. 2). Students’ reason to take part in this experiential learning process may vary from their interest in developing good communication skills, leadership and teamwork abilities. Also, students agree with the fact that taking part in this simulation learning process where they had to take the role of a teacher, they had the opportunity to understand the importance of teaching strategies in order to make the teaching subject easily understood by students. Moreover, they admit that one important aspect related to designing a lesson plan is taking into consideration the classroom management aspects, starting with the classroom ergonomics, understanding the social and psychological aspect of a group and also dealing with classroom crisis.
Due to the nature of this training simulation five of the students were to be the leader of a group and the rest of the students will be the members. As mention above, students were divided into five groups, each group having as responsibility the designing of a lesson plan according to a certain topic. The five students that were chosen to be leaders of the groups were asked to express their comfort level while being a part of the group. As seen in Fig. 3, three out of five group leaders said that they felt very comfortable being a leader, while one of the student said that he felt comfortable, but that he/she would not like to repeat the experience again. One of the student, which acted as a group leader, said that he/she felt uncomfortable and that he/she does not want to repeat this experience again.

When it came to the comfort level of students who do not had a leading position, 67% of them stated that they felt very comfortable acting as a member of the group.

12% of students allege that they felt comfortable working within a group, but they are now more willingly to take the role of a leader. The rest of the 21% of students who were a member within a group stated that they felt comfortable, but they don’t want to repeat the experience within the same group. Some students found it difficult to work with other colleagues or they had a hard time dealing with the leader of the group.

When asked if it was necessary to possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to held that training course, all the students agree that it is critical to be able, as a teacher, to adapt your lesson plan to students’ expectation and unpredictable situations that may occur during a class. As any lesson, our students were faced to deal with unpredictable situations that put to challenge their managerial skills. For example, some activities were disturbed by members from the audience whose main concern was reading a glossy magazine or by those who
constantly asked for additional questions, even though it had nothing to do with the topic of discussion.


As seen in Fig. 2, students’ willingness to take part in other similar learning experience whose aim is to design and implement a training course is fairly high. But, some problems arose from taking part into this teaching experience and these are related to the fact that they were asked to work in groups of ten members, and that sometimes created tension among members of a group. Some of the problems were related to the fact that the decision-making takes more time and reaching agreement can be difficult. But all these disadvantages may help students prepare to become future teachers that can easily adopt a new approach into teaching, that of a joint teaching.

Joint teaching implies teaching the same subject by two or more teachers at the same time. This teaching approach my encounter some difficulties, as mentioned above, but it also has a series of advantages such as the increase amount of ideas that can be generated, the greater diversity of ideas and opinions and a better opportunity for sharing skills and knowledge. Also it is a great opportunity for networking and socializing, taking into account that large groups can be fun to work with.

4. Conclusion

We want to specify that the goal of this training course was students to gain genuine knowledge from an experience. That is why we want to mention some of the advantages of this training simulation course, putting a stress on the fact that the learners were actively involved in the teaching experience and that the learners had the opportunity to reflect on the experience by writing a reflection journal. The purpose of asking students to write a reflection journal is that it allows students to take apart the process skills involved in solving a certain situation and enables them to feel empowered and confident through integrating and applying the skills that they have acquired during the first year of initial teaching training. We also saw this reflection journals as evidence from which we can draw conclusions about students’ progress.

As shown in the research study presented above students opinion about this type of interactive course simulation is, overall, a positive one. Giving students the responsibility to design and implement a lesson plan can be viewed as a way to empower students to take control of their own learning process, letting them experience not only the students’ perspective about the teaching process, but also the teacher’s perspective.

All in all, one of the main goals of this interactive course simulation is to enable the learner to possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the learning experience and at the same time to possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience into their future career.

References

Association for Experiential Education, Available at: http://www.aee.org/
Sternberg, R. J. & Zhang, L. F (Eds.) (2000), Perspectives on cognitive, learning, and thinking styles. NJ: Lawrence Er