EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: A SAD PASSING FAD?

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Green and Taber (1978) have recently argued that "... despite its promises, experiential learning has a number of difficulties which rob it of its full meaning" (p. 889). They argue that because experiential learning is often enjoyable, students frequently view it as a game and thereby fail to make the critical reflections required for effective learning. Further, they argue that most students do not have sufficiently developed observation skills to know what to look for in experiences and that experiential learning is often nonintegrative and non-programmatic. Consequently, students have difficulty relating the experiential learning exercises to each other or to reading assignments. They state "All of these problems serve to weaken the reflective observation phase of learning, thereby diminishing students' ability to develop abstract concepts, to relate the course experiences to other concepts, and to generalize to real-life situations" (p. 890).

Green and Taber go on to illustrate how they were able to restructure an undergraduate course in an experimental design framework, using standardized observation methods, systematic method of data analysis and data-based discussions.

The approach taken by Green and Taber is consistent with the definition of experiential learning advanced by Certo (1977) "... a task designed with specific circumstances to generate trainee behavior which can be observed, discussed, and evaluated against interpersonal theory" (Certo, 1976, p. 113). This definition implicitly contains three elements:
1. A task specifically designed to elicit predictable trainee behaviors and their effects.

2. Observation of such behaviors and their effects.

3. Evaluation of the behaviors in terms of theoretical predictions.

If experiential learning is to meet the requirements of the above definition, both the behavior elicted and their effects must be predictable. However, it is my contention, based on discussion with, and observation of many organizational behavior teachers, that much of what passes for experiential learning does not have the predictable outcomes required of Certo’s definition. I believe that this lack of predictability often results in confusion on the part of students and the feeling that they have wasted their time.

If in fact this belief is true, both OB instructors and students will eventually become disenchanted and the current emphasis on experiential learning will be relegated to the status of a passing fad.

The purposes of this paper are to: (a) describe three uses of experiential exercises (the illustrative exercise, the practice-feedback exercise, and the vicarious learning exercise), (b) describe some of the properties of experiential exercises which I think are desirable for effective learning, and (c) suggest a way in which experiential exercises can be developed to meet the requirements of the above definition.

The Illustrative Exercise

This kind of exercise is intended to illustrate a specific, planned learning point. The term learning point is used here to mean an understanding of a concept or a relationship among concepts, or acquisition of a skill that the instructor assumes to be valid and useful for the students. The emphasis here is on involving the students in such a way that they participate in creating the necessary data with which the learning points will be illustrated and also gain first-hand behavioral experience with the concept or concepts which comprise the learning point of the exercise. The assumption is that if the students participate in creating the data for the illustration they will be more prepared to accept the data and less resistant to accepting a new cognitive input based on that data. Therefore, students are assumed to be more likely to internalize the learning point effectively as well as understand it cognitively.

There are three distinctive characteristics of the illustrative experiential exercise. These are:
1. One or more explicit-specific learning objectives. The learning objective may be an understanding of a set of concepts that the instructor wishes the students to understand, an understanding of relationships among concepts or variables or the acquisition of specific skills.

2. Stimulus materials to evoke desired behavior. Such materials constitute the task which the students perform. They are designed in such a way as to produce the behavior necessary to illustrate the learning point(s) of the exercise.

3. A method for structured data collection and analysis to illustrate these learning points. Once the desired behavior has been produced as a result of the student participation in the task, their behavior is analyzed with respect to the specific learning point of the exercise. This analysis can be based on observation of the behavior during the task or self-reports of such behavior after the task by the students. The data are presented in such a way as to show the relationship between the reported or observed behavior and the outcomes of that behavior. For example, observations of leader style can be related to reactions of subordinates in a role playing situation.

An example of an illustrative experiential exercise is the New Truck Problem (Maier, Solem and Maier, 1975). In this exercise six individuals play the roles of foreman and five truck drivers who are to decide on the allocation of a new truck to one of the drivers. The New Truck Problem is designed to illustrate the theoretical statement that decision effectiveness is a function of the quality of the decision multiplied by the acceptance of the decision. Furthermore, this exercise demonstrates the hypothesis that acceptance is positively related to the degree to which individuals are allowed to influence the decision process.

The materials consist of a background description of the situation (the seniority of each member and the condition of each truck they drive) and a set of roles for each of the participants. The set for the foreman’s role encourages a group decision making approach. The set for the subordinates predisposes them toward believing that they have a legitimate claim to any new truck that will be made available to the group.

After several groups have simultaneously completed the New Truck Problem, data are collected from the foreman and group members and plotted on a blackboard to develop a diagram which illustrates the decision arrived at by each group, the quality of the decision and the acceptance of the decision by the members. A high quality decision is operationally defined for this exercise as one resulting in the disposal of Hank’s truck (the truck in worst condition), repair of Charlie’s truck (which is in need of repair) and no promises for the
future. The number of group members who are satisfied is taken as a measure of the acceptance of the decision by the group.

Dissatisfied group members are then interviewed to determine the sources of dissatisfaction. These reports serve to illustrate the hypothesis that decision acceptance is a function of the degree to which individuals feel they have been allowed to influence the decision process. This hypothesis can be reinforced by asking members of a given group whether or not they would accept the decision of another group in which all the group members are satisfied. It is rare that the members of one group will accept the decision of another group which illustrates that not having had the opportunity to participate in that decision makes the decision less acceptable.

The New Truck Problem contains the three distinctive characteristics of an illustrative experiential learning exercise in that it has clearly defined learning objectives, stimulus material to evoke desired behavior and a method for collecting data that can illustrate these learning objectives.

The Practice-Feedback Exercise

The second kind of experiential exercise is the practice-feedback exercise. The objective of this type of exercise is the development of skills and cognitions such that the learner can produce, consciously and consistently, specifically defined behaviors that are known (or assumed) to lead to effective outcomes in situations that are analogous to the exercise situation.

There are five distinctive characteristics of this kind of exercise. These are:

1. The objective of developing a specific skill or set of skills.
2. Stimulus materials to evoke desired behavior.
3. Feedback to inform trainees as to whether or not their behavior was appropriate.
4. Coaching to correct undesired behavior.

Such exercises are relatively rare in the literature. One such exercise is the Marjorie Winkler exercise, also developed by Maier (1973). The objective of this exercise is the
development of the skill of reflecting feelings through practice and feedback. The exercise itself is preceded by cognitive inputs from the instructor describing the nature of the skill, when its use is appropriate, and guidelines for using the skill.

In this exercise, the entire class participates simultaneously, in interaction with the instructor. The instructor reads a script of a patient’s statements taken from a recording of an actual therapy session between patient and psychologist. After the patient makes a statement members of the class attempt to restate the patient’s comments in such a way as to reflect the feelings implied in the comment. The instructor then comments on the students responses and informs them as to whether or not the responses constitute an adequate statement reflecting the patient’s feelings. The statement actually made by the psychologist in the therapeutic session is then read by the instructor to provide an example of a well stated reflection of feelings. The next statement by the patient is then read by the instructor and other members of the class attempt to reflect the feelings in this statement. This continues through some twenty statements thus permitting every member of the class several opportunities to practice the skill of reflecting feelings and experience feedback with respect to how well he or she actually exhibited that skill.

A second form of the Practice Feedback exercise involves two or more role-players and an observer. During the role playing exercise the observer makes notes with respect to the degree to which each party employed the skills they are attempting to practice. An example of this role playing exercise would be one involving a superior and a subordinate in which the subordinate is given a performance appraisal. The specific learning objective is the development of performance appraisal-feedback skills. The stimulus materials are the information provided to the superior and subordinate concerning the subordinate’s performance, and information to the subordinate concerning his or her attitudes and the problems that he or she has had during the interim between this performance appraisal and the last one. Feedback and coaching is provided by the observer after the role play is completed.

The Vicarious Learning Exercise

The third form of experiential exercise is the vicarious learning exercise. The distinctive characteristics of this kind of exercise are:

1. The objective of developing a cognitive understanding of what constitutes specifically desired behavior.

2. A lecture in which the elements of the desired behavior are described.
3. A role model who engages in such behavior.

4. Optionally, a coach who points out the specific characteristics of desired behavior.

5. Optionally, an opportunity to practice desired behavior after observing the role model.

In one form of vicarious learning exercises, two or more members of a class engage in a role playing exercise in the presence of all other members. When the participants engage in ineffective behavior the instructor intervenes to point out the desired behavior. In like manner, when a role player engages in a behavior that is ineffective the instructor intervenes to point out the error. Here the instructor provides some coaching and asks the role players to take up the role as of the last interaction prior to the erroneous behavior to try more effective behavior. It is essential that in a public role playing situation a role player does not terminate a role unsuccessfully. A public failure often embarrasses students and makes them defensive and inclined to reject both the pedagogical approach and the learning points. A public success is necessary to maintain the motivation of the participants. Since the other members of the class are observing the role playing and the instructor’s intervention they are in a position to learn vicariously the skills being taught.

Another form of the vicarious learning exercise consists of using role models on films. Here the instructor may stop the film at critical points and replay it to illustrate specific effective or ineffective behavior. He or she may comment on the behavior to ensure that the students gain a cognitive understanding of its elements. Walter (1976) has demonstrated that trainees who view role models on film perform more of the modeled behavior than control subjects who do not. Further he has shown that when such role models engage in rather extreme forms of the desired behavior more learning takes place than when the models engage in effective behavior but to a less extreme and therefore less obvious extent.

Conclusion: The Need for Predictability of Experimental Outcomes

Many times when instructors conduct experiential learning exercises, the discussions following the task are highly fruitful and the participants gain insight into what went well or what went wrong. However, in many cases, the development of such insight is highly unpredictable and students end up feeling confused and frustrated about wasting their time. I believe that by designing experiential learning exercises with clear learning objectives, specific stimulus tasks and a well developed method for analysis it is possible to more reliably predict the outcome and to more systematically ensure the acquisition of cognitions, affective responses and behavioral skills relevant to effective interpersonal relations.
I am not arguing that the use of clinical skills by the instructor is inappropriate or ineffective. Clearly learning points, other than those for which the exercise is designed, often emerge and can be capitalized on by astute application of the instructor's clinical skill. But I am arguing that such learning depends on the particular experience of the group, the degree to which group members are able to articulate their experiences and insights, and the skill of the instructor in elaborating the learning point and showing its generalizability. When such learning points do emerge and are effectively capitalized on by the class and/or the instructor the educational experience is indeed likely to be richer than when only the predictable learning points are made. However, I believe relatively few instructors, if any, have such sufficiently developed clinical skills to be able to rely on them exclusively and still be effective. I think that one of the best ways to develop clinical skills for experiential instruction is by use of standardized exercises that meet the requirements specified in the foregoing sections of this paper.

Two Approaches to the Development of Experiential Exercises

If the predictability of behavior and outcomes is indeed as desirable as contended here, then how can such exercises be developed to ensure such predictability? I think there are two fairly straightforward ways of developing experiential exercises. The first and most difficult, is through experimental research. That is, the process is one of designing a trial experiential exercise, conducting it with a pilot group and observing the outcomes. This process is analogous to the design of social science experiments in that the elements of clear objectives, specified outcomes (behavior and its effects), observation and analysis, are common to almost all such experiments. Green and Taber (1978) describe an experiential learning course developed experimentally.

Of course one need not conduct a formal experiment to develop an experiential exercise. However, the process of preparing experiential tasks (stimuli), trying them out (experimental induction) and observing and evaluating the outcomes, whether done formally or informally, is analogous to the conduct of a social science experiment. I believe that thinking in terms of experimental design facilitates the development process, regardless of whether it is done through an experiment or informally.

A second approach which is less time consuming consists of modifying experimental inductions or measurement instruments that have been shown to have reliable predictability. Such an approach is not new to the literature, and has been the source of many of the more popular exercises. The "Johnny Rocco Case" (Schachter, 1951) produces predictable results on the effect of a deviant in a group. The Motivation and Organizational Climate Exercise (found in Kolb, Rubin & McIntyre, 1974) is a modification of the work by McClelland and
his associates on the three social motives of need for achievement, need for affiliation, and need for power, and the Intergroup Relations Exercise developed by Richard Beckhard (also presented in Kolb et al., 1974) which is essentially a modification of prior experimental inductions carried out by Sherif (1962) and Blake and Mouton (1961) illustrates the consequences of suboptimization in organizations where group goals take precedence over total organizational goals.

The process of modifying prior studies into experiential exercises first consists of identifying the specific learning points one hopes to achieve. If a search of the research literature fails to uncover any relevant study, there may be serious question about the validity of the learning points in the first place. Frequently the originally considered learning points will be too simplistic and perhaps naive. A review of the empirical literature may disclose moderator variables and boundary conditions that need to be specified for the learning point to have external validity. If an appropriate study or studies are found, then the following steps are in order:

1. Critical evaluation to determine whether the learning point has in fact been demonstrated by the study and how likely it is that the findings of the studies are replicable in the classroom situation. Such a critical evaluation is the same as one would do if one were reviewing the scientific validity of the study (cf. MacKenzie & House, 1978; Campbell & Stanley, 1963; for guides for the evaluation of scientific evidence).

2. Consideration as to whether the operationalizations of the study can then be used for classroom procedures. If they cannot, then it will be necessary to modify the operationalizations of the study. If modification is required, one needs to question whether the new operationalization still meets the learning requirements of the experiential exercise.

3. Conduct a formal or informal pilot study to determine whether the new experiential exercise is an effective learning device. Such a study can be evaluated in terms of student involvement in the exercise, the degree to which the exercise elicits desired behavior, the degree to which the desired behaviors demonstrate the learning point, and the degree to which the exercise provides for practice or vicarious learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that experiential learning is a valid method for instruction concerning organizational behavior. However, if its potential is to be realized, teachers will
need to keep in mind specific learning points and to develop exercises with stimuli that predictably accomplish the learning objectives. It is also my conviction that if practitioners and teachers follow the guidelines suggested in this paper, the future of experiential learning is promising. If not however there is grave danger that experiential learning will become a sad passing fad.

References


