Experiential Learning in Public Administration Education

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The equilibrium state of the learner is disequilibrium.
(Implied in Hopkins, 1994)

The challenge to prepare public administration students for the new workplace environment is obvious. Opinion polls, politicians, and talk shows denigrate the performance of public administrators; the Post Office seeks a profit; government buildings contract for maintenance services; health care and corrections services are sliding toward private delivery. Unless public managers can provide services efficiently and effectively, the private sector will take over these functions. How well are we preparing students to manage the public's business?

The product of our teaching is the practice of our graduates (O'Hare, 1991). MPA programs are criticized for training people for technical/professional positions rather than for management (Cox, 1990; Ventriss, 1991). Experiential learning can help to redress the tilt toward technique in management education. This paper introduces the experiential learning perspective, describes the experiential learning process, and offers a changed role for the teacher.

The Perspective

An experiential learning (EL) perspective recognizes the classroom as a place for interactive learning, where teacher and students learn by sharing knowledge and experiences. EL deemphasizes professorial lectures, memorization/regurgitation of facts and theories, and the five-hundred-page text. EL priorities are people, emphasizing the student; passion, emotion as well as cognition in the lesson; and pragmatism, integrating theory and practice.

People: emphasizing the student

EL focuses on the individual seeking knowledge, the student, rather than on the instructor. Learning is more important than teaching. Andragogy, adult learning, is the model rather than pedagogy, child learning (Balfour and Marini, 1991). Experiential learning is not the "mug and jug" traditional model where the student is the empty mug into which knowledge is poured from the teacher's jug. Students learn...
better when they are actively involved in discovering for themselves the information or theory or significant questions. The teacher frames the environment, offers a starting point, suggests a direction, and invites the student into the learning process. Learning flows from information brought by both teacher and students. The teacher does not have to know the answers (Horton, 1990). Just as communications is defined by what is received, not what is sent; education should be evaluated what is learned by the student, not what is done or said by the teacher.

**Passion: emotion as well as cognition**

Moffett (1994) states that social responsibility and personal development, both emotion-driven, are two of the three common aims of education. Experiencing a situation blends cognition and emotion. Passion stimulates learning and is produced by learning. Teams, often used in experiential learning, stir emotional commitment to learning and develop a willingness to share and sacrifice. Experiential classroom tasks and homework assignments can motivate because they deal with people as well as things, a feature often absent in studying budget reports, statistical findings, and the critical paths of operations research. EL incorporates intellectual and emotional challenges, which work in tandem to leverage the learning. Because public administration issues are consciously prescriptive (Behn, 1995), the artful administrator needs moral support and normative guidance (Goodsell, 1992). Addressing cases involving ethical problems within the confines of a classroom offers a safe environment for exploring alternative solutions to difficult problems.

**Pragmatism**

Pragmatism emphasizes doing what works, achieving a practical result. Citing the Will James dictum that theories are instruments rather than answers, Nohria and Berkley (1994) describe the pragmatic manager as (1) sensitive to context, (2) willing to make do with the resources available, (3) focused on outcomes, and (4) open to uncertainty. EL seeks to explore patterns and wholes rather than memorizing segmented parts. For example, the first-grader looks for similar markings and colors on the backs of turtles, iguanas, and other crawling creatures. Facts provide the stimulus for pursuing differences, similarities, and relationships among wholes. The MPA student learns public administration pragmatically by observing the driver's license office when obtaining that document, the bursar's office as fees are paid, the library in checking out books, and the food stamp program from the line at Kroger. Exemplary and unworthy practices are noted, systems are analyzed, patterns and relationships are reflected upon.
Experientialists encourage pragmatic learning such as the following:

- thinking outside the existing framework (storytelling is important in helping learners break traditional frames [Justice and Marienau, 1988])
- looking for relationships and composing wholes rather than emphasizing pieces and parts
- creating new information by exploring the new and combining new and old, rather than imitating the old
- emphasizing direct, hands-on contact with phenomena.

Experiential learning demonstrates its pragmatism by resonating with phrases like “reinventing government” (Al Gore), “if it ain’t broke, fix it anyway” (Tom Peters), and “doing things differently” (Peter Drucker). These three elements—people, passion, and pragmatism—describe the experiential perspective.

The Process

The openness of perspective funnels into the discipline of process. Each step of the process is important; skipping steps retards the learning pace. The EL process is conceptualized as a cycle incorporating sensing the environment, reflecting on the sensed information, and acting on the reflections.

Exhibit 1. Experiential Learning Process Model

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Sensing  ——> Reflecting

Acting
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Sensing

The learning cycle begins with sensing the environment—accumulating disparate bits of information by attending to what one absorbs from seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting. Learners vary in what they perceive in a situation because what one perceives is influenced by what has been previously learned. Unfortunately, our “theories in use” (Argyris, 1976) provide a stable picture of the world and are resistant to change (Weick, 1995). Learning requires challenging these “theories in use.”

To sense, one attends to the specific by entering concrete situations, then absorbing new information or looking at old information in a new
way. Driving to work by a different route, going to a new restaurant, visiting a new city, or reading a book or article—every activity of life offers the opportunity for engaging the specific. Looking at one's file from the perspective of the cow; seeing the Internal Revenue Service from the perspective of an IRS employee; or the pressures of the marketplace as the owner of a small business rather than as a consumer—such experiences can offer opportunities to engage the specific and to gain new insights by seeing experiences from multiple perspectives.

Every experience offers the opportunity for learning, but being exposed to variety does not mean that one senses the significant qualities of an environment. The variety present in a situation has failed to register on people who visit exotic places but remark only on the McDonald's hamburgers or the inadequate hotels that they characterize as not up to Holiday Inn standards. Learning begins by attending to what one senses, whether the experience is ordinary or exotic.2

Reflecting

In reflecting, one ponders what has been sensed, then distills the experiences into patterns, theories, or principles for action. Reflection turns experience into learning (Boud et al, 1985). Reading, listening, and discussing help the learner link sensed experiences to general principles.

Karl Weick frequently opens his writings by allowing the reader to sense a situation, and then he proceeds to reflect on the situation. In his reflecting, Weick challenges assumptions about causal paths among variables and asks the reader to decompose and recompose linkages among parts and wholes of organizations. Overlooking the reflecting stage by skipping from sensing to acting is analogous to revving the car motor while the clutch is depressed—a lot of vibration and noise, but the vehicle doesn't go anywhere.

Acting

Acting tests the reflections. Acting is for the manager as theory-testing is for the scientist. Reading or thinking cannot substitute for action. Reading about management is as different from implementing management decisions as knowing about basketball is from playing basketball.

The practicing manager is constantly acting. For the scholar, "acting" may involve not dramatic arts or the public arena, but, rather, writing and exposing one's reflections to the marketplace of scholarly ideas in books and journals, and at academic conferences (Hopkins, 1994). A teacher tests reflections in the classroom, a politician uses the electoral

2James Case (1994) emphasizes learning from ordinary experience.
campaign, an entrepreneur creates or markets a product. Some fail in their "acting." Perhaps they erred in the inferences they drew from the reflecting stage; perhaps they implemented poorly. Management questions do not have right and wrong answers (Elmore, 1986); acting provides feedback.

Although sensing, reflecting, and acting are conceptualized as distinct stages, the learner can engage all stages simultaneously or shift randomly among the stages. When light bulbs go on inside one's head, it is the result of seeing commonalities among things categorized separately, or differences between things previously thought to be the same. The brain processes the stages both sequentially and simultaneously.

The teacher's role in the experiential learning process is to present an initial situation for sensing, to ask students to study and reflect on what is sensed from that initial situation, to challenge each student to distill theories or principles that can be applied to analogous situations, and to allow students an opportunity to practice their learning.

Using the experiential learning model in the classroom requires that the student carry out assignments, then reflect on what happened in order to distill principles or theories for action. Practicing the theories or principles in the classroom setting or society at large allows a spiraling of the learning process to a higher level of understanding.

Alternative experiential learning models

The sensing-reflecting-acting model is one of several ways to frame the process. Kolb (1984) offers a four-stage model; Hutchings and Wurtzdorf (1988) use a "knowing-doing" spiral, a two-stage model. The issue is not whether the process is conceptualized in two, three, or four stages. Each model reflects experiential learning. All are based on the following principles:

- Sensing is selective.
- Reflecting involves distilling rather than inferring.
- Acting rather than thinking is the appropriate test of one's reflections.
- The process is both simultaneous and continuous.

The Changed Role of the Teacher

Not only does the student's role change, the teacher has a new role as well. Lecturing from yellowed notes gives way to guiding and coaching, which are more motivating to students and fulfilling to teachers than instructing and directing. Yet there is discipline, for the teacher is challenged to adhere to the same sensing/reflecting/acting regime.
demanded of the students. The following points describe changes from the traditional classroom and reflect the increased diversity in assumptions, materials, methods, and evaluation.

1. Because the theories or principles learned emerge from one's experience, and each student's experience is different, even when the situation is a written scenario identical for all, the learning from the scenario will differ among the various participants in class.

2. Because management situations usually involve single, unique cases, intuition and specific knowledge are more useful to the manager than statistical generalizations.

3. Because of point two above, a student's answers are usually "better" or "worse" rather than "right" or "wrong." The rationale is as important as the answer, and the ability to appreciate and consider multiple perspectives and possibilities reflects skill at sensing.

4. To get comfortable with the uncertainties of multiple scenarios and incalculable probabilities, teachers and students need practice. I require group work and regular writing assignments, and I respond by electronic mail with comments, not grades. The computer preserves my comments on every written assignment. A mid-term conference lays out my evaluation of the group's performance, and I must justify my assessment.

5. Class materials and exemplary syllabi are not readily available at present, with the exception of an organizational behavior text by Kolb et al. (1995), which is more oriented to business than to the public sector. Some experiential learning ideas and exercises can be found in the Journal of Public Administration Education, the Journal of Management Education, and in the Proceedings of the annual Public Administration Teaching Conference.

6. The work world of organizations is becoming a collaborative environment where people share challenges or work on complementary parts of a task. Meaningful work assignments are best done in a group (O'Hare, 1991). Success in collaboration requires integration of effort, and the whole can be either more than or less than the sum of its parts. In building an education environment analogous to the work world, teachers should invent ways for students to work with each other in order to experience the synergies that emerge from a team challenge. Facing challenges in small groups simulates the workplace.
Hard Things
Adjusting to doing things differently in the classroom may be a greater challenge for teachers than for students. Students face immediate penalties for failure to change; teachers generally do not. Are we honest with ourselves about the ineffectiveness of our pet strategies, stories, jokes, and lectures? We can be snared by the following traps.

The fact trap
Believing is seeing (Weick, 1979); facts are created by one’s perspective. Facts are easy to learn and test, yet in themselves have limited value because they are easily retrieved from print or electronic data bases. Expand your repertoire of perspectives by visualizing every situation from multiple points of view. Expose yourself to different stimuli; look at the familiar from a different viewpoint. Be playful with ideas. Think “what if?”, think paradox, disbelieve your “facts.”

The “feel good” trap
Creativity, a central value of experiential learning, is encouraged by freedom. But the relaxed environment conducive to creativity must be accompanied by a few rules strictly enforced, to ensure fairness. Students who do not perform or share the work load should receive appropriate counseling and evaluation. Becoming student-centered does not throw rules and sanctions out the window. If class attendance is important, attendance must be taken and students or groups must be penalized for excessive absences. If the few rules are not enforced, freedom degenerates into chaos, which erodes the hospitable environment and motivation for exploring beyond existing boundaries. Enforcing rules returns teachers to the adjudication role they are trying to abandon by partnering with students in problem-solving. Welcome to the dilemma a manager faces every day—motivating and disciplining subordinates simultaneously. “Feeling good” must be accompanied by “seeking justice.”

The “playing to strength” trap
Cover all stages of the learning cycle. Emphasizing only what we like or are good at is a trap because it is comfortable and easy. I enjoy sensing, and must force myself to reflect. The typical city manager probably enjoys acting. Know yourself; do a self-evaluation.

The control trap
Get comfortable with ambiguity. The manager doesn’t control the organizational environment, and the teacher doesn’t control the experiential learning classroom. Some days I feel I have lost control over what students are learning; so I trust the system, and so far I have not been disappointed. To maximize creativity and effectiveness, a
teacher should prepare for the new and unexpected and should appreciate multiple perspectives and crazy, creative ideas. Doing differently means living on the edge, not being in control. Seek stability in private life rather than in the classroom.

Conclusion

The empowerment movement, which dominates management thinking today, argues that devolving decision-making responsibility increases employee satisfaction and productivity in the organization. The empowerment idea is transferable to the classroom, where experiential learning unleashes creativity into the learning process. Experiential learning integrates theoretical issues into simulated workplace problems and offers a challenging, motivating approach to public administration education.
References


