Experiential Learning vignette 8: Simulating Experiences

This vignette is derived from an interview with Dale Lyon, Company Director at ExpLearn. It forms part of a [Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) funded by the QAA.

What is simulated experiential learning?

A scenario is created where Students are given ownership of problem solving to challenge their own transversal skills and apply them to contextualised situations with real-time constraints and pressures.

Rationale

Experiential Learning is much more than just experience; the learning must be managed. A facilitator offers problems to participants (normally students at any stage if education) without solutions. There is gamification of real-world problems which allows participants to develop as members of a team to solve issues in real-time. A Facilitator can control the amount of pressure applied to the participants by offering scenarios where catastrophic situations arise, forcing participants to problem-solve and in doing so, enabling participants to develop transversal skills to come to solutions. The solution reached is not always the right one and this forms a valuable part of the learning.

The participants must feel like they're in a live scenario. The environment must be managed to ensure that it's safe (a task that can be largely carried out but the participants). The scenarios must be taken to the extent that they forget it's a simulation and believe that the problem they are working on matters.

During on-the-job learning, there are limits to how much can go wrong. Catastrophic failure cannot be allowed to happen in the workplace but in simulated experiences, we can produce scenarios that push the participants to work in roles that are not available in the work place.

Failure is a key part of the learning, but not catastrophic failure. The best types of failure are a direct result of the participants decision making. How they react to that failure links directly to transversal skills.

Roles: The Facilitator: The facilitator role is key. In a traditional teacher-student dynamic, there is an expectation that knowledge will be supplied to the learner. There is an expectation that the learner is given the best chance to pass an assessment or course and be successful in achieving specific learning objectives mapped to a curriculum.

At the beginning of the process, an external facilitator, has no bond with the students. The facilitator offers no solutions and minimal guidance to participants and can be the "big ogre". The facilitator is more likely to throw problems in the way of the participants to create difficult situations that must be overcome. The facilitator is a skilled role that requires judgement to make decisions on how the scenario will play out. Decisions must be made about when to make an intervention or when to allow

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What happens in a simulated learning environment?

Simulation for experiential learning involves taking people through an artificially created scenario that challenges them to problem solve. It involves taking people out of their comfort zone, applying various pressures to challenge them so that transversal skills are developed by the process of going through difficult situations, where problems arise unexpectedly and must be solved by the participants.

Transversal Skills; a definition

"Transversal Skills (as opposed to job-specific skills) are commonly understood as the ability to work in a team, to communicate effectively, to be proficient in foreign languages, to be entrepreneurial, to be able to think creatively and to be able to solve problems. Transversal Skills are also referred to as generic skills that include soft skills (such as communication, problem solving abilities, teamwork and motivation), but also encompass ICT, language and cognitive skills (such as collaboration, negotiating and information-sharing)." (Goggin et al 2019).

* D. Goggin, I. Sheridan, F. Lárusdóttir, G. Guðmundsdóttir (2019) TOWARDS THE IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF TRANSVERSAL SKILLS, INTED2019 Proceedings, pp. 2513-2519. Available online at https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2019.0686.

the group to work through problems or fail. Catastrophic failure is best avoided and this is down to the skill of the facilitator.

The facilitator is always there to question their reasoning for why they're doing what they're doing. After a period of time you will suddenly find a turning point where you become their best friend, because the suddenly get what you're trying to achieve and the really buy into the scenario. Participants suddenly realise they already have all that knowledge and all you're doing is actually priming it from them.

Roles: Leaders and Followers: During these scenarios, it is often the case that natural leaders or followers dynamics are disrupted. Leaders and followers is a simplistic division of roles within a group and is subverted when people of varying levels of education recognise each other's contributions. It is often the participants at lower ends of the educational scale that can offer the best solutions. The higher level educated participants take time to recognise the value of these participants and the lower level educated participants take time to feel confident enough to speak up. After the realisation of the value of different contributions to solving a problem, there is a breakthrough in the team dynamic; a leader realises that success often comes through incorporating others and directing a group rather than dictating every detail from on high. A team member recognises the value of their own judgement and feels able to contribute to success.

Lessons Learned

There are times when the facilitator of simulated experiences can be seen as being too hard on the students. This is a misunderstanding of the dynamic between participant and facilitator. University/college/school staff tend to want more recognition of hard work, even when that hard work is misplaced and participants decisions end up in the wrong result. Honest feedback is key to creating a close to real-world experience where a brief must be followed properly or a result must be achieved, even if the participants feel hard done by.

Overly positive feedback has no place in simulation. The participants must feel that reaching the right decisions and the right outcomes is more important than how they feel. This aspect of the scenario is particularly difficult for traditional educators, who often want to see the participants get positive experiences too early in the process. A much more positive experience occurs when there is a breakthrough for the participants to stand up to challenges and find a right way forward.

Often these experiences end with a presentation to report what has happened. The full debrief only happens later in the day when the students have had time to reflect. Frustration may be there immediately after the experience has ended but given some time, the participants realise what they have learned is how to work, how to problem solve and how reach the right outcome.