

The Experiential Learning Process: A Value-Added Pedagogical Practice for Faculty of Higher Education in Rwanda

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Introduction

“Sound educational experience involves, above all, continuity and interaction between learner and what is learned” (Dewey, 1986, p. 10). Traditional instruction models are taught via abstract means, not concerned with future potential changes, and are often seen as an archaic approach to education, interspersed by inflexibility, instructivist approaches, and behavioral learning components punctuated by exam-focused curricula (Dewey, 1986; Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016). Dewey (1986) postulated that traditional education follows pedagogic standards that are derived from adult experiences foreign to the capacities of the fledgling learner, thus imposed upon the learner and not experienced.

Progressive instruction is founded in the philosophical supposition that “. . . an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1986, p. 20) must exist. Classrooms should provide real-life situations where learning activities can be experienced through social engagement (Gutek, 2014; Williams, 2017). That being said, with the implementation of common-core standards, and high-stakes testing (Sobel, 2004), less time is allocated for student-centered learning activities. As such, great opposition still exists in educational theorists’ camps on traditional versus progressive instruction (Dewey, 1986; Oral, 2012).

As faculty embrace experiential learning, a survey of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) indicates that a considerable number of faculty (45%) continue to embrace lecture as their sole instructional model (Rosenstein, Sweeney, & Gupta, 2012). Yet, even as faculty continue to model pedagogic practices that are behavioral in nature, increasingly, a number of higher-education institutions are embracing the experiential learning model. But what impact can faculty ensure when obstacles such as class structure, class size, time constraints, increased curriculum requirements, resistance, and lack of expertise by faculty in teaching from an experiential learning perspective become a concern (Wurdinger & Allison, 2017)?

Theoretical Framework

Meaningful and relevant experiences are essential for true learning to occur (Dewey, 1986). As such, this study was viewed through the lens of Kolb’s experiential learning model. Kolb hypothesized that learners created foundational understanding through transformational experiences (Baker & Robinson, 2016). Kolb’s recurring model allows learners to take part in tangible experiences, whereby they reflect through observation, creating theories to explain those observations, and through active experimentation, thereby increasing satisfaction in the learning process (Baker & Robinson, 2016).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of faculty who participated in professional development (PD) in tractor safety training. Objectives included:

1. Determine the demographics of those participants in the professional development.

2. Determine the perceptions of those who participated in the professional development regarding their willingness to incorporate their new knowledge in their course instruction at RICA.

Faculty at the Rwandan Institute for Conservation Agriculture (RICA) participated in a 2.5 day professional development workshop over tractor safety training. RICA University targets instruction for students through a hands-on, experiential learning approach. The Case Study research included survey questions to determine perceptions of faculty that participated in the tractor safety PD. According to Mills and Gay (2019) Case study research “. . . is a qualitative research approach in which researchers focus on a unit of study known as a bounded system (e.g., individual teachers, a classroom, or a school)” (p. 403). Specifically, an instrumental case study approach was utilized as a result of the questions that were used in the survey were pre-developed prior to participant selection (Stake, 1995). This research aligns with the National Research Agenda Priority four which calls for creating meaningful, engaged learning opportunities (Graham, Arnold, & Jayaratne, 2016).

Results / Findings

For objective 1, 83.3% were male, with 16.6% female, with 16.6% in the ages of 25-29, 66.6% between the ages of 30-39, 16.6% of those who participated were between the ages of 40-49, while 16.6% were 50 or over. The educational level of respondents were identified as 42.8% holding a Ph.D., with 57.1% of the faculty held their MS degree. When considering Objective two, the following question was asked: 1. Do you feel this new knowledge will be useful for you when teaching your courses here at RICA? Ted stated that “Now I can show my students how any farming operation can be done more efficiently and in a shorter time when it is mechanized”. Eric identified that “At some point, I think student[s] will need to know how the machines and other equipment are used and it will make so much sense if the faculty teaching the course is the one who is also showing them how these works”.

Conclusions

Results from this study indicate that a majority (100%) of the sample studied were in agreement on the value of the professional development in enhancing their ability to incorporate experiential learning practices in their instruction. Sam said it best when he identified that “The main purpose of RICA is to improve food security in Rwanda. [As such], RICA instructors should be conversant with agricultural machinery before they teach students how to operate them”

Implications / Recommendations

Implications exist for higher education teacher preparation. Universities that are adopting the experiential learning model in their curriculum should be better prepared in this regard. As a considerable number of faculty (45%), continue to embrace lecture as their sole instructional model, (Rosenstein, Sweeney, & Gupta, 2012) professional development in learning practices should be embraced in faculty on-boarding policies at the university level. Professional development in mechanical agricultural operation should be extended, so that faculty teaching from an experimental model approach can rely on additional experiences for course development.

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