Defining your Role: Facilitating Experiential Education

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Submitted by:

Andrew L. Hauser
andrew.hauser@uky.edu

Juliana Markham
juliana.gardner@uky.edu

Graciela Barajas
graciela.barajas@uky.edu

Audrey L. Hawk
ahawk@uky.edu

Tara Rojas
tararojas@uky.edu

Hunter-Anne Julian
hunteranne.julian@uky.edu

Caleb Hickman
caleb.hickman@uky.edu

Daniel Prince
daniel.prince@uky.edu

Austin Leake
austin.leake@uky.edu

Dr. Bryan Hains
bryan.hains@uky.edu

University of Kentucky
307 Garrigus Building
Lexington, KY
859-257-3275

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Introduction/ Need for Innovation

The word *experience* is frequently sprinkled throughout our profession. Agricultural Educators are consistently "trained" to foster learning through experience. Agricultural education, much like other professions, has used the term experiential learning and experiential education almost interchangeably. However, learning and education are different constructs (Itin, 1999). Experiential learning is an experience for the individual, the influence of a teacher is not always necessary. When the focus of the learning is no longer individualized and the influence of a teacher is added, it becomes experiential education.

Researchers offer different philosophies to help explain experiential education and the process of learning. Dewey (1938) argued experiences were only genuine if they were intentional. Itin (1999) claimed the experiential education process is grounded in activities where the learner has to take initiative. Kolb (1984) claimed experiential education was the facilitation of growth and progress until the learner reaches a state of self-direction. Experiential education is often described in a set of steps or sequential process (Wurdinger & Paxton, 2003). Bell (1997) suggested the type of experience the learner has is based on their interpretation. Each researcher's philosophy helps form an individual's interpretation of experiential education.

At the University of Kentucky teacher educators are taking steps to help students build a further understanding of how to facilitate an experience. The role of the facilitator in the experiential education process is important. The facilitator creates an opportunity for experiential learning but should not restrict the learner from having their own experience. Bell (1997) used the example of fear as a way to explain this. Facilitators often want to help learners "overcome fear", but the learner may want to learn to experience fear and learn to manage it. Students learn to guide a learning experience rather than provide direct instruction. This research aligns with the National Research Agenda (Roberts et al., 2016), "Priority 5: Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs" (p.43).

How it Works

Graduate students in the experiential education class, are required to research experiential education and provide a critique of their profession. Within the critique, students are encouraged to 1) develop a working definition aligning to their philosophy, 2) ascribe to or develop a conceptual model of experiential education, 3) examine an area of their profession, and 4) provide 20 articles of literature to support their philosophy. Students later present their findings to the class to enhance the knowledge base of the class. Research and participation in class presentations provides the knowledge needed to facilitate an experience for the class.

As a capstone project for the class, students develop a 45-minute experience for the rest of the class. Students are encouraged to be creative and push their classmates out of their comfort zone. This project is completed with a partner in the class to allow for lengthier experiences. The guidelines for the experience were as follows: 1) incorporate a conceptual model for experiential education, 2) have a working definition, 3) use methodologies to allow participants to interpret

their own learning, 4) develop objectives for the project, and 5) facilitate reflection from the experience. At the conclusion of the experience, students write a written reflection on the experience. Students were asked to address if objectives were accomplished, explain the research guiding the experience, observations from the experience, and overall interpretation of the experience in the eyes of the facilitator. Students are evaluated on their facilitation of the experience and comprehensiveness of reflection. Students facilitated a variety of experiences, often reflecting their interests and worldview.

Results to Date

The experiential education project has been successful in providing a deeper understanding for experiential education. Students in the experiential education course spoke to the value of the experiential education project saying, "the class pushed me outside of my comfort zone, and it allowed me to take a step back and analyze my current teaching strategies to help me enhance my future agricultural classroom". Others spoke to the value of application as, "Being able to put what we were learning into action and then reflecting upon that, was the ultimate way to connect the content in class to real world application" and "This true understanding of experiential education will help me explain the significance and 'So what?' factor of learning concepts for my future students.". Finally, the attitude of reflection was valued as students claimed, "reflecting on objectives has made me think deeper on the importance of evaluating learning objectives to improve critical thinking as student's response to an experience." The awareness of the interpretations and conceptual models of experiential education aid students in preparing lessons for students. Additionally, the designing of objectives and presence of reflection resulted in more effective lessons and fostered critical thinking. Lastly, the written product completed by students showed an increase in creativity and understanding of facilitation.

Future Plans

Teacher educators plan to continue implementing the experiential education project into the experiential education class. Future plans include inviting others to participate in lessons. The addition of individuals to critique and question lessons will provide ideas for future implementation. Additionally, if a pre and post assessment is implemented into each lesson, a better understanding of student growth could be assessed. Finally, lessons will be videoed in the future to allow for deeper reflection.

Cost/Resources Needed

The cost and resources needed for the experiential education project are decided by the students. Resources needed vary by lesson. Students are responsible for obtaining the materials needed to conduct their lesson. It is recommended a classroom with a computer, internet access, and a projector be present for students. The design of the lesson determines the materials and costs associated with the lesson.

References

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