

Exemplifying an International Experiential Learning Workshop

Dusti M. Ingles,
Michael S. Retallick, and
Curtis R. Youngs
Iowa State University

Dusti M. Ingles
513 Farm House Lane
Ames, IA 50011
(309-333-2178)
inglesd@iastate.edu

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Introduction

An Experiential Learning (EL) workshop was held at three higher education institutions in a southeastern European country. The workshop's intent was to use research-based pedagogical practices to enhance student learning resulting from on-campus experience-based programs. This workshop fulfilled a need to emphasize learner-centered and experiential learning pedagogical practices as these institutions have heavily relied on professor-centered and passive approaches to teaching and learning in the past. The workshop was titled *Science with Practice: Experiential Learning in Higher Education* after the program of the same name at Iowa State University (Retallick & Steiner, 2009).

This experience was designed to equip participants with learner-centered and active learning teaching methodologies. To accomplish this, learner-centered teaching was foundational to workshop content and demonstrated in the workshop design. Participants were introduced to principles supporting academic-based EL programs. Academic-based undergraduate research and work experiences served as a primary example. For the final activity, participants conceptualized and began to develop an EL program for undergraduate students.

The goal of this abstract is to share the learner-centered approaches used in this international setting. We are striving to answer the question, "How do we disseminate Ag Ed expertise in EL internationally?" Our objective is to exemplify an EL workshop presented at three higher education institutions in an international setting.

Workshop Methodology

The methods for the workshop are exemplified here according to workshop structure, audience, content, and pedagogical practices. Workshop structure includes duration and design. Related to the audience, we discuss attendance and participation. In content, we share the workshop objectives and key topics. Finally, our pedagogical practices are described.

Structure

This one-day workshop was presented at three public universities by two co-presenters. It was designed in four 75-minute sessions. However, the workshop sessions were reduced to one hour to account for break times and translation needs.

Audience

Professors of Agriculture from each university were invited to the workshop. Attendance totaled 30 participants across the three locations. Additionally, an assistant, an interpreter, a communication specialist, and various university staff were present at each location. Attendance was in-person, and participants were asked to engage in learner-centered activities throughout.

Content

The workshop objectives were to: 1) establish the foundational principles of an EL program, 2) explore the components of a U.S.-based EL program, 3) develop an EL program locally, and 4) consider EL program management. To establish foundational principles of an academic EL program, key topics included principles of teaching and learning (NRC, 2000), EL (Dewey, 1938; Knobloch, 2003), and adult learning (Knowles et al., 1998). Next, the components of an existing EL program were explored by sharing the program learning and work agreement, coursework, and poster session components. Participants were then asked to transfer and apply the principles of EL to develop a proposal for a local EL program. Finally, the participants considered local EL program management, including potential strengths and challenges in their proposed academic programs.

Pedagogical Practices

The workshop used learner-centered active learning strategies to demonstrate pedagogical practices. The workshop was designed using the EL prelection, experience, reflection, and transfer (PERT) model (Retallick, 2010). In preparation, participants were provided with a translated, electronic copy of relevant pre-readings and workshop materials. At the start of the workshop, we facilitated prelective writing and discussion. Activities employed during the workshop included reflective writing, jigsaw (group experts), and four corners/ sticky note discussions (CELT, 2017). At the workshop onset, participants were provided with a printed workbook that included a description, instructions, and space to complete each workshop activity. At the end of the workshop, participants reflected on how they could transfer the workshop concepts and apply them to the development of a local on-campus EL program.

Results and Implications

The workshop concluded with participants presenting their ideas for implementing academic EL programs locally. In some instances, these represented realistic opportunities, as is exemplified in the comment, “I will use this to improve and even create new programs.” Participants expressed hope for improved education by integrating academic EL programs. In determination to overcome barriers, one professor exerted “We have to show students more organization for experiences... if I have the chance, I will share this with the Dean of the faculty.” The feedback we received included appreciation for the methodological approach of presenting theory and demonstrating practice: “Other workshops have presented theory, this workshop got into the nitty gritty of applying it. This has been fruitful in terms of the practical knowledge.” The positive participant response indicates the methodological approaches applied in this workshop were effective in this international context. We recommend future workshops employ EL principles to disseminate Ag Ed EL workshops internationally.

Reflections and Future Plans

Our reflections include recognizing the benefits of co-presenting the workshop, modifying the workshop structure, and refining workshop content to provide adequate time for interpretation. Co-presenting the workshop offered logistic and technical benefits and a richer experience as multiple perspectives could be shared. We also found value in reflecting on ways to improve the workshop throughout the experience by processing and sharing insights together. The concept of an academic EL program was novel to our audience, which necessitated adaptation of the content as we practiced the principle of meeting students where they were in their learning. Additionally, interpretation needs were variable at each location due to individual participant English language skills. This led to adaptive strategies for presenting the content and engaging in discussions. Continued training and development are required to strengthen EL in Ag Ed in this international context. Our intentions are to follow up with the participants as they develop academic EL programs; we remain open to opportunities to provide continued support and present subsequent workshops.

Workshop Resources

The largest costs associated with this project were presenters’ time, transportation, lodging, and meal per diem. Required workshop supplies included sticky notes, easel pads, easel markers, pens/pencils, a printed workbook for each participant, and a materials packet for each location. These costs will vary depending on location and number of participants.

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