Experiential Learning Activities in Distance Education: Challenges and Examples

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One of the greatest challenges faced in developing and teaching a course for Distance Education Delivery is to actively engage students with the course material so that their learning is maximized. This paper explores the potential for experiential learning activities in distance education.

Common themes in descriptions of experiential learning include the centrality of human experience as a valued source of learning, the potential for every experience to be a learning situation and the central role reflection plays in learning (Burnard, 1993, 1990, 1989; Kolb, 1984; Pfeiffer & Goodstein, 1982). Three characteristics of experiential learning that are relevant to a framework for course development and delivery include: experiential learning as an attitude toward learning - questioning, problem posing, testing ....; experiential learning as a form of knowledge, as legitimate as propositional knowledge (textbook) and practical knowledge (knowing how); and experiential knowledge as learning through experience and learning from experience (Garratt, 1983; FEU, 1983; Keeton & Associates, 1976; Dewey, 1938).

Experiential learning cycles can be used as a basis for planning activities. For example, Burnard (1989) describes a cycle involving five stages: brief theory input, concrete experience, reflection, generation of new knowledge and application. An illustration from an assignment in a course developed and taught by the author shows how this cycle can be applied: students receive a brief explanation of spiritual assessment (Stage 1); they complete an audiotaped spiritual assessment with a "client" (Stage 2); through a series of questions they are stimulated to reflect on this assessment - their thoughts, feelings, appraisal of the assessment questions (Stage 3); they discuss the new knowledge generated by this activity in a paper (Stage 5). The same cycle can be applied to the educator as she reads/listens to and reflects on the student’s presented work.

In addition to assignments, experiential activities can involve the use of reflective questions and exercises, simulations/games, and videotaped scenarios. In all cases, if these are being evaluated for grading, the quality of the reflections should be the focus of grading, not the activities in and of themselves.

Challenges in designing and delivering experientially oriented activities for distance education include: fitting such activities within the curriculum framework of the program/course; planning activities which can receive their maximum benefit from distance education technologies; self-reflecting on one’s own philosophy of teaching/learning to ascertain if it is consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of experiential learning; and evaluating experiential learning activities in a relevant and meaningful manner.

Experiential learning activities can greatly enhance learning for both student and educator. Such activities promote a partnership stance between the two. They increase student awareness, are real/whole/interactive, can be light-hearted and fun, and foster critical thinking. It is important to remember, however, that some students may find such activities to be uncomfortable or threatening and may prefer other means of learning.

In being involved in experiential learning, we may confidently agree with Dodo in Alice in Wonderland. When Alice asked the animals and birds that had fallen with her into the pool of tears how to get dry, the Dodo told her that a caucus race would be the best thing. “What is a caucus race?” asked Alice. “Why,” said the Dodo, “the very best way to explain it is to do it!”

Reference List


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**Biographical Sketch**

**Doreen Westera** is an associate professor at the School of Nursing, Memorial University. She has been involved in nursing education for over twenty years, teaching in the areas of community health nursing, health promotion, counselling, and spiritual dimensions of nursing practice (the latter two courses by Distance Education mode). Professor Westera has also developed four videos which are currently being distributed in Canada, United States, Australia and the United Kingdom: Spirituality; Nurses and Spiritual Care; Spiritual Assessment; Community Assessment. Additionally, she is a Certified Canadian Counsellor and has a small clinical practice at a community agency.

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