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The Theory of Experiential Education

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The interns slowly shuffled into the staff meeting. Each looked slightly slightly more tired and frazzled than the one before. It was time to debrief the program we had just completed. As we heard the last bus driving away full of happy students singing and talking, we settled into what had become nearly assigned seats in our staff room. The staff had found this program to be particularly difficult to run. The logistics were sloppy, meals were barely acceptable, the participants themselves seemed to require more supervision and direction than usual. Informal discussion was more focused on the upcoming day off than on the next group which would be arriving in less than twenty-four hours.

Many people who have had supervisory responsibility in an experiential education organization may recognize the above scenario. Some who have worked with new groups of interns each year may have even come to expect this dreaded staff gathering, when the “wheels seem to fall off.” Everything was going so well. No task was too bothersome or difficult for the interns. They seemed to take pride in demonstrating their level of commitment to the program and each other. And yet, at almost the same time in each program cycle, they get into this “funk.” But this is not the only predictable scenario which could have been written. We could have picked a different point in the program cycle and written a description of a scene which might also be familiar to many of those working with interns.

Why is each year with new staff and interns a roller coaster of ups and downs? Possibly personal development theory (i.e., Maslow, 1970; Piaget, 1965; Kohlberg, 1969) could help explain some of the changes that are taking place as interns live
and learn in a new environment. Theories of group dynamics—storming, norming, conforming, etc.—may also be helpful as interns work and often live together (Kerr & Gass, 1987). However, the primary expectation of all staff—interns included—is that they meet the needs of the clients. We believe there are unique and important aspects and roles to the internship experience which should be examined more closely. Interns are exposed to a tremendous amount of information as they work to address clients' needs. They must contemplate learning theory, memorize safety systems, and learn a wide variety of both simple and complex tasks. The process through which they come to understand their new roles seems to be a key to interpreting the emotional roller coaster.

Patterns have emerged as interns attempt to balance their own individual needs with the requirements of being a staff member. These patterns appear to be closely related to the ways in which interns operationalize the theories of experiential education. Almost without exception, those interns that have the most successful experience, are also highly successful with their clients. We have always attempted to create a group situation which is a supportive and nurturing environment for new staff. But it is becoming apparent that no amount of peer support can compensate for repeated bad experiences with clients. As supervisors interested in helping to create the best possible internship experience for new staff, we now realize that how we help them integrate theory and practice is at least as important to their ultimate success as is the general group atmosphere.

The purpose of this article is to examine the cognitive process used by college student interns as they attempt to combine theory with practice to fulfill requirements of a class in outdoor adventure education. It is hoped that a careful examination of how a group of students integrates theory with practice will illuminate how those newly initiated to the field interpret theory, and the effects their understanding has on their total learning during the internship.

THE CONTEXT

Providing college students with an appropriate setting for the study of experiential education has been, and continues to be, a challenge for educators. Given the academic requirements of most colleges and universities, frequently students learn theory in a class setting one semester, and are later required to gain practical experience in the application of these theories during an internship or field placement. Because of general education requirements, major requirements, and other educational and social activities sponsored by colleges, it is rare that students have the time to engage in a substantial internship while in residence at the college. However, through the cooperative efforts of the American Youth Foundation's Merrowvista Education Center, and the University of New Hampshire's Outdoor Education Program, a unique opportunity was available for a small group of
students enrolled in a course entitled, "Theory and Practice in Outdoor Adventure Education." During the Fall semester of 1991, a group of students enrolled in this course lived and worked at the Merrowvista Education Center, in Ossipee, New Hampshire. The students had their class meetings at Merrowvista and were required to apply their theoretical understandings to a wide variety of client groups whom they worked with during their semester-long internship.

This intense internship experience, coupled with the coursework and class discussions, provided the opportunity to understand how students studying experiential education apply the theories they are learning in class to the leadership positions they are required to fulfill by virtue of their staff responsibilities.

**Stage Theory**

Our observations of this group, and our experiences with previous groups of interns lead us to conceptualize a four-stage developmental process through which students put their new theories into practice. But before proceeding to discuss this developmental process, a few words of explanation about stage theories may be helpful. Social scientists have found some comfort in describing different facets of human behavior and development through the use of a progressive series of levels, which are often clearly recognizable, one from the other. In the area of cognitive development, Piaget (1965) hypothesized a logical sequence of thought that young people use as they begin to make sense of their world. Kohlberg (1969), Gilligan (1977), and Rest (1979), have each offered stage theories attempting to explain moral and ethical development. In psychology, Maslow (1970) detailed psychological development using a pattern of stages and conflict resolution.

The authors' use of a stage theory framework to explain the intellectual process used by student interns is not intended to be a rigid, formal progression of concrete levels of understanding, but rather a possible recognizable pattern that may exist. In this way, our stage theory is more similar to the works of Fox (1991) and Whitehead (1929) who suggested fluid evolutionary phases of development and understanding, rather than a fixed overlay which can be applied to human behavior.

This group of student interns conformed across a semester to a rather predictable pattern of development as they attempted to put their newly learned theory into practice. Our belief is based on the oral and written accounts of the students from this semester, and our accumulated experience working with other student interns in past semesters.
THE FOUR PHASES OF THEORY INTEGRATION

From the accounts furnished by students, and our observations, we have concluded there are four phases as students attempt to move from theory to practice: Exhilaration, Rejection, Integration, and Transformation.

Exhilaration

The students entered the internship experience excited about the potential power of an educational approach they knew little about. Through the class section of the internship, they were exposed to the writings of John Dewey (1938), Richard Kraft (1987), Stephen Bacon (1983), and the works of others which could help the students gain insight into the philosophical underpinnings of experiential education. The new students were often intoxicated by what they understood to be experiential education. They read of the Progressive Education Movement and were exposed through the readings and class lectures to a new and fascinating portrait of what “school” could be. The seduction became almost complete as they read countless testimonials from students who had taken part in experiential programs. Study after study describes how the experiential education process changes the learners and empowers them to take control of their lives.

During this phase, it is natural for the student intern to view “traditional” education with disdain. All that is not experiential may be viewed as worthless and a threat to the experiential principles which must be embraced in the schools. Experiential education becomes a panacea for all that ails schools. Teachers are often seen as falling into one of two distinct groups: they are either experiential educators, or they aren’t. If the student intern has been a participant in an experiential program, this further increases the dedication and commitment to this educational approach.

Rejection

Armed with these “new” theories, it is predictable that student interns would want to have leadership and teaching opportunities in which they could try these theories out. During the semester, each of the interns was able to work with a wide range of participant groups. In all cases, the intern came to temporarily reject or seriously modify their previously held belief regarding the efficacy of experiential education. Usually this rejection was not immediate. The intern was often successful with her or his first few programs. This success was due in part to their own modest expectations, and the scheduling design which allowed interns to work with progressively more difficult client groups.

Despite the temporary successes, it is inevitable that not all groups respond equally well to experiential education methods. This fact was made clear to our interns when a group of sixth-grade students from an urban area arrived at
Merrowvista for a three-day program. These "city kids" were not particularly responsive to the introspective questioning techniques of interns attempting to facilitate group development through open discussion. Participants of this program often were hostile toward the staff, and disregarded even the most reasonable rules for safety and respectful behavior.

Faced with this apparent crisis, the interns began to question the vigor with which they had embraced experiential education. The "panacea" was proving ineffective in this situation. Interns expressed intense frustration and a sense of betrayal. They appeared to blame the participants for the bad behavior, and themselves for being gullible in their belief that something other than strong discipline would work with this group. Where once experiential education was the remedy to educational problems, it was now a contributing factor to the lack of control in this program. In the conversations with and between interns, and in their writings, it became clear there was a crisis of confidence and a rejection of the belief that experiential education was universally applicable in all situations.

Integration

Despite the initial exhilaration and rejection, the interns still had to reconcile the fact that experiential techniques did work with many of the earlier groups. It is at this point that the students were most befuddled. If experiential education worked for some of the groups and under some conditions, could one predict which groups would be successful, and under what conditions? O'Reilly (1989) writes of the need to allow students to be "incoherent" in their learning. He reasons that one should not demand totally logical and reasoned answers from students. If students are not allowed to appear disoriented in their learning, they soon learn that the appearance of understanding is more highly rewarded than the struggle to understand. Interns were deeply involved in the struggle to integrate theory and practice. The open nature of the class discussion allowed this struggle to become obvious to each of them.

No theory can be universally applied within the social sciences. Faced with this realization, the interns began to re-examine and re-think the original theories they had studied in light of the experiences they were having. Several questions emerged: Under what circumstances do experiential techniques appear to have the greatest results? What background information does the intern need in order to design experiential activities for the client group? This realization of the need for background information about the client groups was mentioned by several of the interns. One student clearly connects the theories of Dewey, regarding the teacher's obligation to learn about the students, with her experiences during the internship:

"Programs at Merrowvista will not be as productive if the staff are not clued into the backgrounds of the incoming participants. As Dewey has stated in "Experience and..."
Education, "... the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources" (Dewey, 1938, p. 40). I didn't actually realize how relevant this theory was to the livelihood of programs at Merrowvista until the group from the city came for a three-day program. As a facilitator of the program I was given information regarding the city, though at the time I thought it was for cocktail party conversation. It wasn't until the participants arrived that I realized that the knowledge I was given was pertinent. (Bedford, 1991)

This re-examination of theory based on the students' experiences, forms the crucial link in the ultimate integration of the classroom activities with the leadership opportunities.

Transformation

If the students are successful during the integration stage in connecting a classroom theory with experiences in the field, they are then ready to begin fashioning their own theories. Bacon (1983), Gass (1985), and Kolb (1976), have each described some of the necessary ingredients for the transfer of learning to occur. Students in the transformation stage are attempting to enter new leadership experiences with a set of beliefs and methods which they have transferred from prior experiences. Without the ability to transform past theory and practice into a coherent new or amended theory, the students would always be limited by their need for the theories of others to understand and act on their world.

During the transformation stage, the students attempted to make broader statements regarding their learning:

I was able to learn from each group specific areas in which they needed to work, thus allowing me to intentionally pick which activities I wanted to use. I gained a better understanding of what it is like for a newcomer in the field to try to understand experiential education. And most importantly, I learned first hand that the best way to learn to facilitate experiential education programs is simply to experience it. (Tucker, 1991)

The above quote provides a clear example of the intern's attempt at theory development. This student may not have authored the most exhaustive treatise on the value of experience in the learning process, but she has created a solid theory of learning based on her internship. During the transformation stage, the interns often became excited by their ability to connect seemingly unrelated experiences to help form a clearer picture of what they had learned. Rather than a series of random events, the interns began to recognize that there were often patterned responses by participants to changes in style and activity by the leader. Perhaps the most
important element of the internship is the opportunity it provides for interns to recognize these subtle patterns of cause and effect.

Implications

If student interns’ understanding of theory and practice is viewed using these four stages, then there are some implications for the way one would work with students during each of these stages. Certainly, alerting interns to these stages would be a possible first step. If students could be encouraged to chronicle their developmental process using diaries or journals, important information could be gathered concerning factors which cause or retard the process of moving from theory to practice.

This stage theory also suggests that there are critical periods for those supervising student interns to be particularly attentive to the interns’ educational needs. If supervisors can anticipate and expect a period of rejection, they are in a better position to help the student gain deeper meaning from the experiences that have contributed to this rejection. Likewise, as the student gains seemingly unconnected internship experiences, the supervisor may be able to help in the integration process of these experiences into a more coherent pattern of understanding. Perhaps one of the more important implications of this stage approach is the recognition that each student intern on a staff may be at a different stage of understanding. This is important to recognize because it forces the supervisor to view the interns as a collection of individual learners, each of whom has a unique perspective on the internship. This individual approach will discourage the natural tendency for supervisors to view students as “the interns,” as if their group affiliation was more powerful than their individuality. Staff training for interns can take on a new focus if one attempts to meet the individual stage needs of interns, while also addressing the needs of the group.

Educators must also help create internship experiences where students are allowed to fail, and where supervisors are themselves periodically befuddled. Those designing internship experiences should consider ways in which interns and supervisors can work on problems together. Each of the stages of development—exhilaration, rejection, integration, and transformation—provides an opportunity for interns to positively affect the organization with which they are connected, because each individual will resolve these stages differently.