Teaching Strategies: Experiential Education

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Overview

"Learning experiences are generated naturally in one's daily life, but they also can be arranged to provide opportunities for specific types of learning" (Luckner & Nadler, 1997).

Experiential education is a teaching strategy with three key components: experience, reflection, and educational objectives. Students "learn by doing" and then reflect on this process towards specific educational goals. This is achieved through a variety of activities including work experience, laboratory experiments, project creation and demonstration, and outdoor excursions. According to John Dewey (as cited in McDermott, 1981, p. 520), learners must reflect and associate relationships between an experience and external factors in order to benefit from that experience. "The belief that all genuine education comes about through experiences does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938 & 1981, p.517). By facilitating structured experiences and reflection, educators can encourage an educative process, creating applicable learning which can then be built upon -- fostering further growth.

 According to the Association for Experiential Education (n.d.):
"Experiential education is a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities."
   The core principles of experiential education are:
- Authentic learning includes a process of reflection, critical thinking, and self-authorship.
- Structured experiences that encourage the learner to take charge of his/her learning
- Active learning engages learners in curiosity, issue resolution, investigation, creativity, and experimentation.
- Engagement is interdisciplinary and holistic. Learning does not only occur in a classroom.
- Learning is an individual process. New learning is dependent on prior learning.
- Healthy relationships are developed between the learner and his/her self, others, and the world.
- Experiential outcomes can be unpredictable. This allows the learner and educator to participate in and learn from a wider range of experience.
- Personal development is nurtured.
- The educator facilitates experiences to ensure support and safety while encouraging development. He or she works towards specific educational outcomes, but also recognizes natural and spontaneous opportunities for growth. The educator recognizes his/her biases and shortcomings, and actively works to mediate how these influence the learner.

Experiential learning originates in the combination of an experience, reflection and thought process, and issue resolution. Authentic learning results from structured experiences with natural consequences, from success and failure. These cycles layer upon each other to build the learners' knowledge and experience base. Experiential education occurs when the originating experiences happen with educational objectives in mind.

<h2 style="background-color:purple;color:gold;">Quick Start Guide - Experiential Education 101</h2>

Incorporating experiential education into the classroom can be a smooth and beneficial process.

1. Plan your lesson.
   a. Consider the concepts that you will teach in the lesson.
      i. Why are these important?
      ii. How are they applied?
   b. Create an activity that focuses on the application of these concepts. This can be a concrete connection such as building weight-bearing structures with toothpicks in a basic engineering course. It can also be a more abstract connection such building a raft to examine sociological factors.
   c. When first getting started, try using this generalized six step process for running class:
      1. Connect -- Allow the class to get to know each other better
      2. Do it -- Facilitate and activity that allows learners to do, explore, and/or act. Try to design this activity in a way that provides a new 'discovery' experience to learners.
      3. What happened? -- Reflect on the experience either individually or with a group. Share publicly the raw data of the experience.
      4. Why is it important? -- Find trends in behaviors. Generate and exchange feedback.
      5. Generalize -- How do these specific behaviors relate to the real world. What are the consequences and effects? What is the big picture?
      6. Now what? -- Apply this learning to a new or similar experience. Create a different outcome by making changes in action or behavior.
2. Lecturing is a great educational tool, but it can sometimes leave learners uninvolved. In planning your lesson, consider alternative methods for reaching your intended learning objectives.
   a. Short initiatives: These activities can be a fast, fun, and interactive way for you to help learners focus on a task, build rapport with each other, and grasp important highlights from class.
   b. Hands-on Activities: Individually or in small groups, have learners take part in a hands-on experience. This could take the form of physical or mental construction such as preparing a presentation on information that has not yet been presented to the class or building a model of an object discussed in class.
   c. Reflection: Encourage learners to process their own learning. This can take the form of

individual reflection such as blogs, journals, and essays, or it might take the form of groups discussion and constructive feedback. Another example could be utilizing self-graded exams as a mode of reflection.

    d. Self-authorship: When possible, encourage learners to generate their own solutions to problems. Encouraging creativity and critical thinking, will create a more engaging classroom experience.

3. Allow the learners' educational experience to help shape the learning process.

    a. Learning is dynamic and dependent on the individual and the group. Learners may need to deviate from the lesson plan in order to maximize their learning. Although this is not always feasible, consider adapting your plans when possible.

Variations

This section contains examples of how you might begin to think about adopting the aforementioned teaching strategy and the tools you might consider to employ.

- Experiential education in practice at the Sidi Bouskri School in Smimou, Morocco, Where Math Grows on Trees.
- History comes alive at Auburn University at Montgomery, Learning by Doing.
- Hands-on science at the university of Texas Austin, Freshman Research Initiative.

For reflection activities, consider asking students to keep a blog or journal chronicling their experiential learning experience, observations, and constructive revisions.

On the Web

- Association for Experiential Education
- National Society for Experiential Education

In the Library/References

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