Experiential Learning in management, bounds during debriefing activities: A follow up on "Ethical Issues with Experiential Activities."

Abstract

Experiential learning is a common method used in management education for knowledge acquisition through "learn[ing] by doing." To success on it, it is imperative that students or participants execute a form of reflection. A common form of reflection is debriefing. Through this reflection as a group activity, participants share their reflections. These sittings may also disclose personal and/or group perceptions that may be negative for students concerning their classroom relationships and beyond. In this session, we dive into best practices identified through the literature as well as opening debate for sharing other practices executed by participants interested in this method.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, debriefing, ethical issues.

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Introduction

Experiential learning has become a common pedagogical method among management faculty within higher education. Experiential learning (EL) is considered an educational form or method based on processes in which the individual "merges experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (McCarthy, 2016). Simply put, a learning method in which the participant learned by doing, and reflected upon what "has been done."

EL has been used and documented over the last 30 years as a methodology accepted in business education as well as among many sub domains, such as: entrepreneurship (Mason & Arshed, 2013), management (Waddock & Lozano, 2013), accounting (Dellaportas & Hassall, 2013), finance (Marriott, Tan, & Marriott, 2015), ethics (Laditka & Houck, 2006), organizational behavior (Glick, 2013) and international business (Ramburuth & Daniel, 2011).

Nevertheless, some academics still question the validity of this learning process. In some cases, scholars argue that EL may not adequately satisfy learning objectives or desired outcomes. Similarly, there are also ethical implications at play.

EL implies a process where the learner should debrief, internalize and reflect upon the experiences, and come to a realization which achieves the learning objective. In management subdomains such as Business Ethics (Sims, 2002), Organizational Behavior (Shani & Lau, 2000) and Human Recourses (McMahon & Quinn, 1995), when debriefing is used, some concerns are presented (Mackenzie, 2002) which may be triggered during these sessions. For instance, when debriefing EL activities surrounding topics such as: ethical conflicts due to cultural differences,

diversity, and sexual harassment. These topics may bring about confrontation among students, with direct implications for their future ability to accomplish group goals and interact at a social level during class and beyond.

Situations such as this require management educators to reconsider what are the best practices in EL, mainly during the reflection process with elevated attention toward debriefing activities. The Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society Conference presents a valuable venue to engage in collaborative discussion between management educators who have used EL and those interested in incorporating this learning method into their pedagogical repertoire.

The primary goal of this session is to open a dialogue where participants with EL interest review a group of best practices related to the debriefing process. This goal will be achieved by reporting current practices identified through the literature, discussing these guidelines, debating the merit of these practices, and allowing participants to provide guidance from their own experience. Second, this session will generate a collective document to be shared within the management education community containing our consensus of preliminary best practices.

Finally, the session may allow for the organization of a research group, with the potential to produce an article related to this matter.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

As indicated previously, EL includes four components: experience, perception, cognition, and behavior. For EL the "experience" itself is the execution of a hands-on activity from which the learner experiences personal growth by doing. Instructors select suitable opportunities that will allow students to learn concepts and their application, while also learning about themselves.

Perception is the degree to which individuals become aware of a situation. For EL specifically, those moments will occur when the learners can recognize and identify the knowledge acquired during and after the experience. Importance must be given to the different momentums during the perception state, one that occurs during the experience itself and another one during the hypothesis testing "abduction" as indicated by Charles Pierce (1878) (Miettinen, 2000).

Cognition is achieved when learners mentally acquire and assimilate fresh knowledge. This process involves the rational acceptance of new information that may or may not challenge previous perceptions.

Finally, the behavioral element of EL captures execution of the cognitive process through action. As the learning process is internalized, participants should apply their newly gained knowledge toward behavioral change or the reinterpretation of past preconceptions.

Kolb (2014) indicates that "Reflection" (What did I experience?) is potentially the most fundamental element of the EL cycle. In many cases, this reflection occurs during the debriefing process. Yet, this process can be executed after the experience is developed (Pearson & Smith, 1985), as well as during the experience itself, also known as "the here & now" (Creese, 2007). Our emphasis relates precisely toward this reflection process during debriefing sessions.

Pearson and Smith (1985) have identified "debriefing" as a method for reaching internalization by reflecting on how the experiences are part of the knowledge acquisition process and assimilating that knowledge into preexisting cognitive structures. Debriefing requires individuals (alone or in a group) to reflect on the purpose of the "experience." Common issues that may arise when engaging the reflection stage are expectations from participants.

Lecturers, instructors and facilitator await participants to indicate what they learned and experienced, during the practice itself.

However, it appears as though some debriefing activities (usually in small groups) are not necessarily synonymous with effective reflection (Dufrene & Young, 2014). In other words, when comparing groups that have received a debriefing versus others who have not, the effect upon the dependent variables is not significant. In contrast, many scholars in management education continue using this method to reach reflection from the students during EL (Reynolds & Russ, 2008) .

As we indicated before, there are many sub domains within Management Education which tend to cover topics that may be highly sensitive. In order to stem this issue, some have utilized methods such as reflective personal journaling (Riley-Douchet & Wilson, 1997). However, debriefing sessions are considered to have added value because students can listen to the reflection of others to better understand their own experience. Yet, sharing students' reflections during a debriefing session may also negatively alter how peers are perceived at both the personal and group level. Consequently, identifying a group of best practices for EL debriefing sessions with an eye toward solving these issues would be valuable for the management teaching and facilitator community.

The intent of this session is to produce a set of guidelines (including those indicated in the literature review along with those shared among contributors in the session) to apply in debriefing gathering. Second, our session will be open to discussing the ethical implications of using EL. Finally, this session will help to identify potential coauthors for a larger-scale research endeavor.

Session Description

We propose formatting our session as a roundtable discussion. During the first fifteen minutes we will present (using projectors) some basic theoretical frameworks and the best practices identified in the literature review under the traditional lecture format (handouts will also be provided). After establishing this as a base line, we will ask participants to briefly introduce themselves and their previous experiences with EL. We will then facilitate a discussion/debate (thirty minutes) among participants concerning divergence and convergence from the practices found throughout the literature. We will come prepared with questions to ask concerning EL in order to initiate discussion or spur participants. However, we see our role in the discussion as equal members, favoring a decentralized interactive network to allow for brainstorming to be most effective. We would rather all participants address one another directly as opposed to filtering all of the comments through us. This will be much more efficient and likely more productive. We will request that participants base their comments either in the literature or their own personal experience when enacting EL, especially debriefing. We will audio record the session if agreed to by all participants, as well as take notes concerning insights and ideas that are sparked in the process. We will also collect contact information from all participants so that we can follow up. Finally, we will ask participants to indicate their interest in participating as coauthors on a large-scale research endeavor centered on the session's main topic, best practices for debriefing EL for Management Educators. A small amount of time will be offered at the end for final comments from participants.

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