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DESIGNS FOR RESEARCH ON SIMULATION-GAMES, CASES, AND OTHER EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this symposium is to provide both a review of the published research on experiential learning and recommendations for research designs which can answer some of the questions being asked about experiential learning. Each member of the panel has been charged with accomplishing the above with regard to his assigned area; i.e., either simulation-gaming, cases, or other experiential exercises.

INTRODUCTION

One of the amazing aspects of education is how much faith instructors have in the efficacy of the methods which they use. Fads arise in education just as they do in other aspects of our lives and educators follow the movement leaders as though they know something that we don't. In the area of fashion, such lemming-like behavior has little consequence for us if we have chosen to follow the wrong leader. However in the field of education, unquestioning following of leaders can result in life-long disadvantages for our students if we have used inferior methods of instruction. Thus it behooves us to carefully examine the claims made for new methods of education before we adopt them in any widespread manner.

Following a line of thought arising with John Dewey and his disciples, we have seen increased emphasis being placed on learning through doing [1]. This approach has been given the more elegant formal title of experiential learning, where experiential learning might be defined as involving the whole person in the educational process. Increasing numbers of instructors are now using experiential exercises as a supplement to, or in some cases a replacement for, the traditional lecture method. The reason cited for making this change is that such exercises improve learning because they require greater student involvement than does the lecture method which relies primarily upon cerebration. Unfortunately it is difficult to find research evidence to support this position which cannot be called into question by detractors from experiential methods. Furthermore, developing experiential exercises requires a greater investment in time than does the construction of a set of lecture notes. Are experiential methods sufficiently more effective to warrant this investment? Another point to consider is can certain concepts in fact be learned more effectively through lectures?

An issue related to the foregoing points is, given that experiential exercises are superior for certain purposes, how should they be used to gain the greatest educational benefit? Experiential exercises are a tool for accomplishing a purpose and any tool will yield a desired effect more efficiently if it is used according to appropriate principles. When a tool is first designed, users are left to their own devices to determine the best way to use it. Once the tool has been used by a large number of people, principles should be codified to save new users from the necessity of having to develop their own principles. It still will be necessary for the user of the tool to develop proficiency with it, but the time required should be considerably lessened if a set of principles is available.

We lack such principles for the application of experiential exercises to the educational process. Therefore research is required in this area as well as the others cited above. Anecdotal reports do not substitute for such research as frequently the reporter overlooks important points which can assist the new user in developing proficiency in the use of

experiential exercises.

It is important to recognize that the two forms of research described above are both complementary and overlapping and the researcher should clearly indicate which kind of research he is conducting or the result is likely to be increased confusion rather than increased knowledge. Perhaps this accounts for the result reported by Gentry and Wolfe in their survey of ABSEL members regarding the research efforts of ABSEL members [2]. They found that ABSEL members are less satisfied with the quality of research and its continuity as reported in ABSEL proceedings than with other aspects of ABSEL. In addition the quality of research presentations was seen as needing improvement.

SYMPOSIUM STRUCTURE

As an attempt at improving the research being done on experiential methods, a symposium panel was created. Because of the breadth of the area covered by the rubric experiential exercises, the area was subdivided into three parts: simulation-gaming, cases, and other experiential exercises. Panel members were selected for each part and they were asked to cover the following issues for their assigned part:

1. Assess the quantity and quality of the research on their experiential method.
2. Examine the problems of doing research on their experiential method.
3. Present research designs which are doable and which if done would make a significant contribution to the field.

The members of the audience of this symposium will be provided with handouts by the panel members which summarized their key points and which also include suggested research designs.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dewey, John and Evelyn Dewey, Schools of Tomorrow (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1915).
- [2] Gentry, James W. and Joseph Wolfe, 'ABSEL: Empirical Findings on the State of the Association,' 1981 ABSEL Proceedings.