

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999
BACK FROM THE FUTURE: AN ABSEL “MERLIN” EXERCISE FOR THE YEAR 2005

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ABSTRACT

In preparation for ABSEL’s 25th anniversary meeting, we have involved a number of our senior members in a futuristic “Merlin” exercise. The exercise is derived from T. S. White’s notion that Merlin was living his life from the future backward. The exercise asks participants to imagine that they are living backward like Merlin, describing what they would say back in the year 2005. This paper describes the results of this exercise.

INTRODUCTION

Remember Merlin, from T. S. White’s *The Once and Future King*? He had an uncanny ability to know the future. When asked about this insight, Merlin explained:

How did I know to set breakfast for two?...Now ordinary people are born forwards in time, if you understand what I mean, and nearly everything in the world goes forward too. This makes it quite easy for ordinary people to live...but unfortunately I was born at the wrong end of time, and have to live backward from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people living forward from behind.

As it turns out, Merlin is not alone in his approach. Nor is it really unfortunate. Great athletes and managers alike owe much of their greatness to the Merlinesque qualities. Wayne Gretsky, the great hockey player, explained the principle when asked about the key to his success: “When everyone else on the ice is trying to get to where the puck is, I try to get to where the puck is going to be.”

In an effort to infuse a bit of Merlin into ABSEL’s planning, several of our senior col-

leagues have thought backwards from the year 2005, and they have constructed a description of our organization that is surprisingly uniform in its major features. In addition, minor differences are not contradictions. They simply focus on issues considered to be important in the overall framework. Therefore, the following discussion is organized in that fashion—major features and other important issues.

METHOD

We sent the Merlin survey to ABSEL Fellows, Board members, and officers in order to get input from members who had both exposure and historical perspective on ABSEL’s nature and development. The instructions were as follows:

1. Use e-mail designated to the network from which this message came.
2. Place yourself and your thinking in the year 2005. ABSEL has become the premier organization in the world for teaching/learning research in business and related disciplines. Interested parties from around the world are contacting ABSEL and coming to meetings to view ABSEL’s activities. Without any concern for restraints or difficulties of obtaining such a stance, describe what ABSEL is like *for you in this successful 2005 year*. Do not write any limitations. For example, do not write what ABSEL should not be, or what it should not do. Simply write the way you see it as successful in 2005. (Try for a two-page description.) Build pictures, articulate stories, and if you wish engage in dialogue with other ABSEL members by e-mail or telephone.
3. Send an e-mail message with your one to three pages responding to the preceding stimulus statement.

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

4. In order to participate in this portion of futuristic planning, please send an immediate response indicating your intention. Then send your response within one month.
5. On future rounds we will engage in a walk backward in our thinking to describe *how we think ABSEL arrived at this new successful position*. (Continue to presume that ABSEL did succeed to develop a highly successful reputation. Do not entertain any thought of failure or a different outcome.) We will engage in the “Walk Back Together” to discover milestones and hurdles that have been overcome *in the future*. Once we have identified milestones, if time permits, we will engage in another round to identify change elements necessary for ABSEL to reach the Merlin determined future.
6. We will proceed with the Merlin exercise regardless of the number of persons participating. Keep in mind that this exercise is not meant to be a consensus about the future, a Delphi estimate of the future, or a democratic decision about what ABSEL should be. It is a creative exercise to explore opportunities and possibilities—no more.

In fact, seven Fellows and two directors responded. The current total of Fellows, directors, and officers is 32. So, what follows is from a 28% sample.

WHAT WE LEARNED

A major point of agreement among Merlin participants was that ABSEL’s championing of pedagogical research would position it on the forefront of academic excellence by the year 2005. There are two basic reasons for this.

ABSEL and the Emerging Importance of Pedagogical Research

First, the ABSEL approach will prove to be more effective than conventional research and teaching. As one Merlinite put it, “...our non-

ABSEL colleagues will finally have to admit that pedagogical research, using simulations and experiential exercises, is far more important than the effete efforts that we now see published in our main academic and popular journals. The reason is simple. Pedagogical research is aimed at producing results—not at advancing the current fashionable and almost always fleeting notions of an elite at a local university or editorial staff of a widely distributed journal. Moreover, the production of results in academic and actual business circumstances requires a far greater understanding of human information processing and decision making, group and organizational dynamics, and market forces than we now have available in our leading textbooks. As the famous psychologist, Kurt Lewin, noted many years ago, ‘If you want to understand something, try to change it.’”

Our interpretation may be less confrontational, but no less damning, for the conventional academic approach. The problem grows from an educational paradox. On one hand, the traditional academic approach emphasizes the learning of theory. But theory consists of generalizations that are not useful without a knowledge of how they apply to varied reality of specific business situations. On the other hand, some educators emphasize knowledge of applications—how problems are solved in specific business situations. But the fact that each situation is different means the knowledge cannot be generalized, and students have trouble adapting to a changing environment.

The resolution of the paradox comes from a knowledge of how students learn. For instance, using the framework of Bloom’s educational taxonomy, both theory and applications represent “low-level” learning. That is, teachers teach and students learn them as facts or patterns and general concepts. To use them, students need to develop higher level thinking skills, such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The real key to successful education, then, is to develop these higher level skills. They cannot be taught; students have to learn them. In fact, suc-

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

successful students learn them on their own. But, unfortunately, this often comes as an accidental by-product of the education process. ABSEL's emphasis on experiential learning addresses them directly.

The second factor contributing to ABSEL's ascendancy is that education trends are favorable. As one contributor noted, "the year is 2005 and higher education has finally come to heel behind the other sectors of society pushing for increased productivity and effectiveness." Another notes, as a result of this increased institutional emphasis on teaching..., faculties spend much more time discussing their class structures. The implication, of course, is that ABSEL is uniquely qualified to address these trends, and the world will look to ABSEL (along with ISAGA, JASAG, and NASAGA) for guidance.

ABSEL's Role in an Emerging Global Educational Environment

To quote another contributor, "the 2005 picture of ABSEL is as the premier organization on the globe for teaching/learning research in business and related disciplines with:

1. A headquarters with full-time and part-time staff
2. Digital archives of writings on pedagogical issues, research, etc.
3. Periodic workshops on experiential and simulation pedagogy.
4. Major experiential and simulation journals
5. Special interest groups (SIGs) on topical interest/expertise areas
6. Competitive funding for research and development
7. Training programs for interested colleges/departments/institutions/companies
8. Annual global meetings (in Hong Kong, Sydney, Paris, Moscow, etc.)
9. Enhanced practitioner/academic interaction

and a considerable presence on the internet along with an internship program for teachers

who want to work with master teachers for a semester or term."

Again, these global comments were echoed by another who states that ABSEL is:

1. Linked with other simulation/experiential oriented organizations around the world
2. Sufficiently funded so that it could sponsor business internships for its members
3. Fully funded to provide training sessions for future generations of simulation, gaming, and experiential exercise developers
4. Recognized for its contributions to the education of future business leaders
5. Beneficial to its members regarding merit and promotion at their places of employment.

In addition, strategic alliances and joint ventures are part of ABSEL 2005. These relationships go beyond those already established with ISAGA, JASAG, and NASAGA to include societies, for example, in Australia, Brazil, Germany, and New Zealand.

Two benefits of this international thrust are paramount. First, as stated by one Merliner, ABSEL's growth and exposure will be derived from the interactive operation of world-wide intercollegiate games scored completely by web sites and from a new conference hosted in Europe every year. The new conference, WABSAL (World Association for Business Simulation and Active Learning) has supported ABSEL and brought many Europeans and Asians to the ABSEL stateside meetings.

Second, international growth and exposure will allow the development of ABSEL-CO, a for profit company. "This is an organization modeled after the Harvard case writing and case publishing organization. It is one in which all microworlds, simuworlods, and research articles submitted to ABSEL are copyrighted by ABSEL, put on a web catalogue, sold worldwide, and within which royalties are paid on the bases of revenue generated by each piece."

How We Got From Here to There:

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 26, 1999

ABSEL's Rise to Greatness

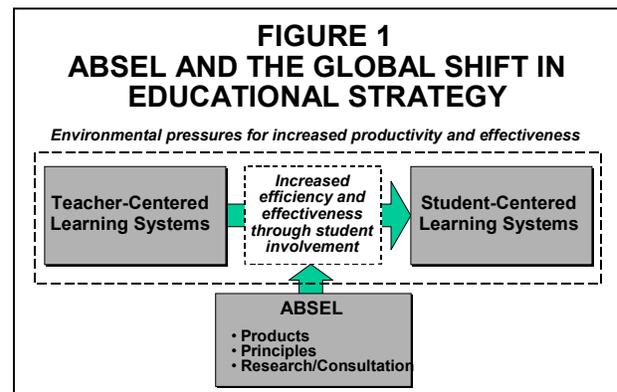
The Merlin retrospective—one view at least—mapped out a number of specific components in ABSEL's ascendancy. They begin with the previous quote that, "the year is 2005, and high education has finally come to heel behind the other sectors of society pushing for increased productivity and effectiveness." In order to understand what this means, compare the kinds of productivity oriented proposals we are seeing today with the ABSEL approach our Merlins saw in the year 2005.

The predominant models in 1998 called for mass lectures, video courses, and so forth—achieving productivity by placing education in the hands of educational superstars who would provide education through the mass media. However, this created a lock step and teacher centered system that gave the illusion of learning. But it tended to foster passive responses on the part of students. Furthermore, it did not deal well with the varied needs of learners. This was especially problematic in the face of an increasingly tumultuous environment that put a premium on proactive, creative and self-directed managers.

ABSEL's alternative strategy was to create a model student centered education, where students, rather than teachers, drove the educational process. The key to productivity was to provide tools and educational models that place more of the learning burden on the students themselves. Getting students more involved in the education process leveraged the efforts of educators, enabling them to focus on issues of educational design and the development of self-study tools. More important, the student centered approach freed time for teaching through experiential exercises in which their role is to help students recognize the links between their educational experience and the underlying principles they have learned on their own.

The adoption of this second strategy launched ABSEL into a position of global prominence.

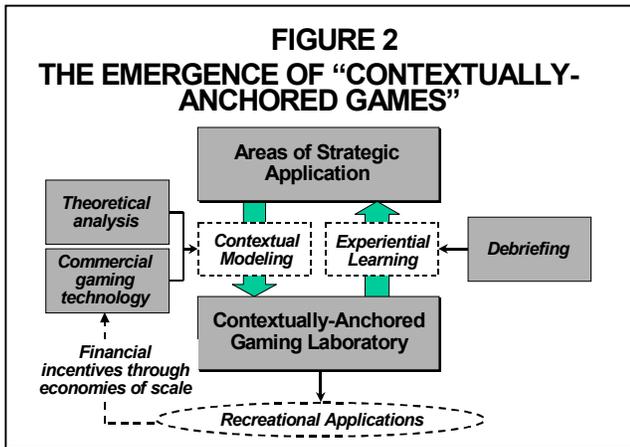
As the premier organization for promoting the development and dissemination of simulations and experiential exercises in the sector of management education, it was in a natural position to address emerging education needs. (See Figure 1). Its success has grown out of its contributions in three areas: *products*, *principles*, and *research consultation*.



Products

While ABSEL members remained active in developing a broad range of educational designs, they pioneered the marriage of educationally oriented simulation and experiential learning research with modern recreational game technology to develop contextually anchored games—educational games that embed management decision in multimedia representations of actual working situations. (See Figure 2). The effect was to create highly motivational learning environments, or laboratories, in which students gain artificial experience which can be used as the basis for understanding how management principles can be applied in practice. Through the debriefing process, students are then prepared to recognize the principles governing their laboratory experience and apply it in actual management settings.

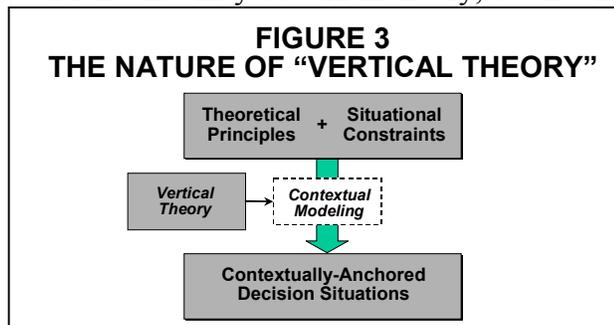
The benefits of debriefing can be included in recreational games as well, through help screens or embedded strategic dialog. And even without this, the gaming experience can still increase the general level of management understanding in the population, independent of formal educational applications. However, perhaps the great-



est contribution of ABSEL’s involvement in the recreational game market was to bring greater financial resources to the problem by evoking economies of scale

Principles

One of the key elements in ABSEL’s ascendancy was the pioneering work its members have done in the development of vertical theory. (See Figure 3. Vertical theory refers to the principles linking basic management theories with their practical applications. One of the popular criticisms of modern business education is the assertion “that may be OK in theory, but not in



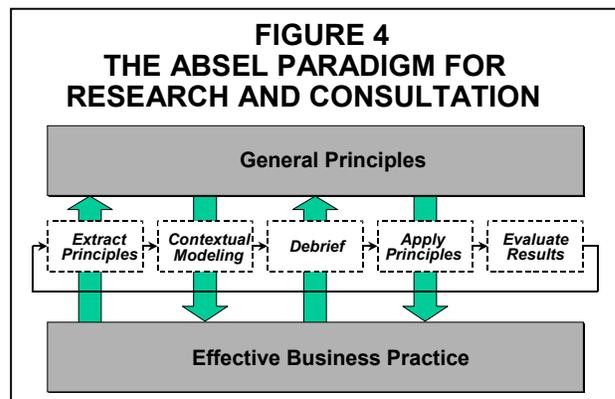
practice.” To develop an effective contextually anchored game, ABSEL developers link theory with credible management situation, modeling the way managers would actually have to respond if the theory is valid. Whereas conventional games call for decisions in abstract (matrix) form, contextually anchored games embed the decision in an actual decision situation. For instance, a pricing or advertising decision would be made in the context of a simulated meeting,

involving the kinds of people and criteria that actually would be used in a real company.

The critical element in vertical theory is the development of filters through which extraneous facts are eliminated. Or through which the application of an established theory is modified by situational constraints. As noted earlier, the major educational contribution of ABSEL’s approach is the development of the higher level thinking skills students need to make practical management decision.

Research and Consultation

We have combined research and consultation, because in the area of contextual gaming, the two involve similar processes. These are portrayed in Exhibit 4.



In the quest for vertical theory, ABSELers have pioneered a variant of the classic action research paradigm developed by behavioral scientists. Researchers learn by observing the effect of their interventions on the quality of management decisions. In the ABSELian application, they begin by conducting in depth studies of actual management situations to determine the underlying principles behind how decisions are actually made. They then model these decisions in light of both theory and situational constraints, as portrayed in Figure 3. Next, researchers seek to convey these principles to students by administering the contextual simulation and debriefing. Having learned from the experience, students attempt to apply what they have learned. Researchers evaluate their success, revise their

theory where appropriate, adjust their model, and continue the cycle.

ABSELUte IMPLICATIONS

One of the premises of the Merlin exercise was that participants should not worry about the feasibility of the futuristic vision. Our results, then, provide insights into what ABSEL might become, not what it is. The implications, then, are for us to mobilize around the vision the Merlins have created.
