

# **THE GIFT OF THE EXPERIENTIAL**

**By Bart Allen Berry**

## **Preface**

Instead, this is a book about the experiential approach itself—the theories and ideals that provide the movement with rapidly growing credibility in the training and development community and acceptance in corporate boardrooms across the world.

The perspectives and knowledge I have gained through two decades of program leadership and facilitation are shared by many of my colleagues involved in the experiential approach to development. Call this an industry, movement, or calling—all such descriptions seem to apply simultaneously. Formalized experiential learning programs touch the lives of millions of people every year, and informally delivered experiences, gatherings, and classroom experiments touch many more.

This book was written to validate and summarize the value of the experiential approach and to promote its expansion and further integration into human development at all levels.

## **Introduction**

The experiential phenomenon has spread like wildfire across the United States and the world because it is a powerful, multifaceted approach to human development. What is meant by “Experiential”? Simply put, experiential refers to the many human growth and development programs which feature as their primary modality a “learn by doing” approach, characterized by dynamic individual and group exercises. Included in experiential learning programs are activities such as ropes courses, team problem-solving exercises and simulations, outdoor adventure learning programs, adventure therapy, outdoor education, high adventure challenge experiences, and all of the various action-oriented, structured learning experiences that are now used with populations of all kinds.

The leaders in this rapidly growing and evolving field are management consultants, outdoor program leaders, teachers from pre-K to post graduate, therapists, mountain climbers, social workers, Ph.D’s, camp counselors, spiritual leaders and many others who have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into the dynamic world of experiential education. Education is a limited term that often suggests traditional, classroom-style structured learning, while the essence of the experiential approach is anything but traditional.

The experiential approach is now showing up everywhere—educators include it in elementary school curriculums, executives imbed it in strategic planning activities for multinational corporations, social workers use it in group homes, and corporate trainers find it provides the critical motivation for leadership development programs. It’s used with youth at risk as well as with high-performing students, in corrections programs, in work with the handicapped and developmentally disabled, and by government agencies as varied as the Department of Defense to local government units.

This book will focus on the positive and unique aspects of the experiential approach. Its purpose is to provide you with a new perspective on education, training, and personal growth and give you an appreciation for the use of experiential approaches as keys to unlocking human potential.

## **1. A Fresh and Evolved Approach**

Over the last several thousand years, education has developed largely into a patriarchal system of information dissemination controlled by mostly bureaucratic institutions. Accredited schools, tenured professors, and staid curriculum do impart knowledge, and certainly one cannot argue that the content of what is being delivered is not valid or important. But the salient questions are:

*How is it being delivered?*

*What is the retention rate of the student when didactic lecture, book reading, and memorization are the methods used?*

*What is the involvement level and satisfaction of the student or participant in this type of teaching style?*

We know this to be true: Rote memorization has its limitations. People don't learn best in a one-sided, purely didactic lecture format. Much research has been done about how people learn. The characteristics of adult learners alone demand a more effective teaching and learning approach.

Before we explore specific aspects of the experiential approach, it is useful to review research-based principles of adult learning and common themes in universally accepted theories about learning in general. (The Adult Learner, A Neglected Species; Gulf Publishing, Houston, Texas; 1990)

### **Characteristics of Adult Learners**

**Adult students are mature people and prefer to be treated as such.**

They learn best in a democratic, participatory, and collaborative environment. They need to be actively involved in determining *how* and *what* they will learn, and they need active rather than passive learning experiences. They are self-reliant learners and prefer to work at their own pace.

**Adults have needs that are concrete and immediate.**

They tend to be impatient with long discourses on theory, preferring instead to see theory applied to practical problems. They are task or problem-centered rather than subject-centered. This doesn't mean they are not interested in theory, but they must also see the practical application of the theory. Their learning is not complete until it is expressed in appropriate action.

### **Adults are more impatient in the pursuit of learning objectives.**

They are less tolerant of busy work that does not have immediate and direct application to their objectives. If it is not relevant to their needs, then they aren't very interested.

### **Adults have useful past experiences.**

They are more realistic and have insights about what is likely to work and what is not. They are more readily able to relate new facts to past experience.

### **Adults enjoy having their talents and knowledge contribute to the learning activity.**

They bring their own experiences and knowledge into the classroom, and like to use these as resources for learning. They appreciate practical activities that build on and use their prior skills and knowledge.

### **Adults are intrinsically motivated.**

They are motivated by internal incentives and curiosity rather than external rewards. They are also motivated by the usefulness of the material and learn better when it is related to their own needs and interests.

### **Adults are sometimes fatigued when they attend classes.**

They appreciate any teaching techniques and devices that add interest and a sense of liveliness—variety of method, audiovisual aids, change of pace and sense of humor—anything that will make the learning process easier and more stimulating.

## **Generalizations from Cognitive Learning Theories**

Adapted from Kemp, JE and Smellie, DC (1994). *Planning, Producing and Using Instructional Technologies*. (7<sup>th</sup> edition) New York: Harper Collins.

There are many learning theories, each of them emphasizing various aspects of the teaching and learning process. These are well summarized by Kemp and Smellie. The well known cognitive learning theories agree on several common elements. Notice the overlap between what we know about adult learners and what these learning theories tell us about the learning process.

### **Motivation**

For learners to be fully engaged in learning, their attention must be completely focused on the material presented. Learners increase their effort when motivated by a need, an interest, or a desire to learn. The

experiences must be relevant and meaningful to him or her in order to build motivation.

### **Individual**

### **Differences**

People learn at various rates and in different ways according to their intellectual ability, educational level, personality and cognitive learning styles. Differing comprehension rates of learners must be anticipated and provided for in teaching strategies.

### **Learning Objectives**

When learners are told what they are expected to learn, their chances for success are greater than when not so informed. The stated objectives indicate what content in the learning materials will receive attention, so students can focus on what is important.

### **Organization**

### **of**

### **Content**

Learning is easier when content, procedures or skills to be learned are organized into meaningful sequences. Learners will understand and remember material longer when it is logically structured and carefully sequenced. The rate at which the information is presented should be determined in terms of the complexity and difficulty of content so that it can be better synthesized and integrated. Teachers or facilitators need to provide the signposts that will help learners to understand the structure of the lesson.

### **Pre-learning Preparation**

Learners should have the necessary knowledge and skills that may be prerequisite to their successful learning or use of the instructional media. Assumed knowledge must be identified and stated, or learners tested and opportunities provided for them to acquire the prerequisites.

### **Emotions**

When learning involves the emotions and personal feelings as well as the intellect, it is influential and lasting. Learners also have positive and negative emotional attitudes that can either interfere with learning or can increase motivation. A moderate amount of anxiety or challenge activates most learners and increases learning, but excessive anxiety interferes with learning.

### **Participation**

In order for learning to take place, a person must internalize the information—merely seeing or hearing is not enough. Therefore learning requires activity. Active participation by the learner is preferable to lengthy periods of passive listening and viewing.

Participation means engaging in mental or physical activity that will help the learner to understand and retain the information presented.

### **Feedback**

Learning is increased when individuals are periodically informed of progress in their learning. Knowledge of successful results, a good performance, or the need for improvement will contribute to continued motivation for learning.

### **Reinforcement**

It is important for learners to receive reinforcement. Learning motivated by success is rewarding; it builds confidence, and it will affect subsequent behavior in positive ways.

### **Association**

Learners will learn and remember information better if they have many associations to it. Isolated information is more difficult to comprehend and less permanent than the learning of information that is related to the student's prior knowledge.

### **Practice and Repetition**

Rarely is anything new learned effectively with only one exposure. Provision should be made for frequent practice and repetition, often in different contexts, to promote long-term retention.

### **Application**

Complete understanding has taken place only when the learner is able to apply or transfer the learning to new problems or situations. First, the learner must have been helped to recognize or discover generalizations (concepts, principles, rules) relating to the topic or task. Then opportunities must be provided for him or her to apply the generalizations or procedures to a variety of new, realistic problems or tasks.

A professional experience of mine validates the theories above. In a course I teach on customer satisfaction in the international MBA program at the University of California, I must deal with usually dry subjects such as statistical modeling, ideal process flowcharting, and research methods. My approach has been to make each exercise and module experience and process oriented. This course is consistently rated the highest in the series, semester after semester. In contrast, a lecture-based course taught by someone else that allows for no group discussion or interaction received continuous complaints and is no longer taught by the same instructor.

## **2. Breaking Away from the Patriarchal**

Often bureaucratic educational institutions or programs take the stance that they are going to tell you what to learn and how to learn it. This patriarchal attitude structures the teacher-

student relationship as follows: The teacher on a pedestal holding all of the sacred knowledge and rationing it out to the student. Such a one-sided perspective does not promote memorable learning experiences. Rarely is the presenter so dynamic as to anticipate every question, reaction, insight or thought of his listeners; and yet this one-sided approach to learning is, sadly, too common.

We certainly do not suggest the complete departure from traditional teaching methods. It is the basic relationship between teacher and student that must be examined for its relative effectiveness in light of more effective experiential approaches.

### **Process Oriented Peer-to-Peer Approach vs. Traditional Teacher/Student Relationship**

The very nature of the experiential approach requires a new way of looking at the roles of those involved in the learning experience. The experiential approach uses a teacher, leader or facilitator to *guide* peers through a process. Although the facilitator has knowledge and expertise to share, his/her main responsibility is to guide, not to lecture, through the experience of learning and discovery. This peer-to-peer shared adventure relationship necessarily requires much more intense participation by the learner. When participants in this process are fully immersed and fully involved, there is nowhere to hide from the learning! Often the teacher will learn as much as the student in this shared experiential learning adventure.

### **Promotion of Self Responsibility and Self Determination**

Rather than following rigid plans and using structured measurements, the experiential approach emphasizes setting up exercises and processes which adapt to the learner's level of receptivity, resonance and capacity for utilization of the material. In the experiential-learning realm, learners are given the opportunity to find their own way within a set of control parameters set up by the facilitator, who is fully confident that the learning outcomes will be accomplished during the journey.

The experiential learning journey emphasizes the ability of individuals to figure it out, to find their way, and to perform their own integration. Self-responsibility is emphasized in experiential learning, not because the learner is solely responsible for the learning content; but because learners are entrusted to make their own observations and insights about the subject matter. Retention will be better if learners "swim around in the material" for themselves, thereby experiencing deeper learning than they would through traditional methods such as pure memorization.

Can learners be trusted with their own thought processes and approach to learning? The evidence is clear that not only can they be trusted, but also that they learn better this way!

## **3. Touching the Person**

### **You Mean It's About Me?**

Few learning programs aim to touch the individual on a personal level. Experiential learning takes not only the intellectual value of the learning into account but also considers

the impact of the experience on behavior. Instead of analyzing the impact of a particular concept from a purely conceptual and theoretical perspective, the aim of the experiential activity is to provide the learner with new alternatives in terms of his/her individual behavior.

### **Touching the Emotions**

Traditional dry classroom-style learning may occasionally present concepts or ideas that touch an individual to the point of eliciting genuine emotion. The experiential learning environment, on the other hand, repeatedly imprints concepts, ideas, and themes because of the ever present “in your face reality” of the experience. Experiential learners are truly engaged and experience a wide range of emotions as they deal with the tasks in the activity. Supporting and empathizing with other participants on a ropes course, sharing an evening of astrology instruction while learning to use a powerful telescope, or learning how to use a cause and effect diagram by trying to hit a target with a real catapult are all examples of learning that would not be as memorable without the personal contact with the other participants.

Sliding down your first zip line, hitting your catapult target 50 yards away with a ten-pound rock, or seeing Saturn’s moons are certainly ideas that you could intellectually conceptualize. These concepts are much more memorable when they have been actually experienced.

### **Finally, A Chance to Play**

Although many of us were never any good at chemistry in high school, we always preferred going to the lab to sitting in math class drilling on algebra problems. Although your competency in algebra may have been much higher than in chemistry, you always knew you were going to get to play with something in the chemistry lab. Many high school chemistry teachers understand the experiential approach and will try to stimulate the interest of students with dramatic experiments that produce some kind of tangible affect—who doesn’t remember their first experience mixing vinegar with baking soda? Many of us remember being sent to the office for doing things with Bunsen burners we shouldn’t have or mixing things together that have no business being in the same test tube—but admit it—it was fun, and fun is a powerful motivating force. Although most chemistry students never got around to memorizing the periodic table, they can tell you a lot about combining certain acids, bases and compounds to produce various effects.

The learner longs for the opportunity to try something new and to truly *experience* it. This might explain why millions more people have visited the haunted house at Disneyland than have read Mary Shelly’s literary classic Frankenstein. The big draw of experientially-based courses in everything from race car driving and motor cycle riding to watercolor painting and conversational Japanese is the experience itself, not the opportunity to read a textbook.

When learners finally get the chance to touch, taste, feel, smell, and taste the learning experience, they are receiving much more information and stimulus. The closer we are to the actual experience, the better we learn and the more fun we have. Of course some of our experiential learning lessons are not positive ones, but they do carry the same levels of emotional impact that make them memorable—remember the expressions, “learning from experience” or “Experience is the best teacher.”

## **Is It OK To Feel This Good?**

We all have images of the traditional disciplinarian schoolteacher who runs his classroom with an iron hand. Anything remotely construed as enjoyment while learning would seem to be antithetical to the disciplinarian approach. This approach is characterized instead by rote repetition, dry lecture and lots of testing and quizzes. These approaches are not always a bad thing in terms of creating real learning and competence, but they don't positively motivate any but the truly serious student.

Experiential learning, on the other hand, is recognized as being fun. People are motivated to attend, even arriving early and staying after the session is over because they are enjoying themselves all the way through the process. Experiential program participants often comment, "Why did I wait this long to try this?" instead of, "I'm glad that's over with!" The experiential approach to learning can also be credited with inspiring many individuals to enter a chosen career because of the positive and inspirational experiences they have had in an experiential activity that relate to their new field.

## **Back to the Natural Self**

We human animals enjoy a natural and particular way of operating and behaving. Many learning approaches are counter-intuitive and involve significant re-socialization and self-discipline before learning can occur. Experiential learning aims at harnessing inherently natural behavioral tendencies. Typically, experiential exercises put participants into problem-solving situations where they must react, evaluate, make decisions and take action. When learners evaluate their own performance at the end of the exercise, they always put their observations into the context of what their natural reactions were to the problem or situation presented to them. Behavioral self-awareness is created as each individual participates in this post-activity evaluation process.

Integrating this new awareness and translating it into behavioral changes is one of the key objectives of experiential learning which is why experiential learning programs often emphasize a series of progressive exercises where participants can practice their new behaviors and approaches until they become more natural and instinctive.

Experiential learning does not emphasize the reference of textbooks or other research during the learning process (as opposed to more didactic classroom based learning approaches). Instead, it aims to help individuals re-calibrate their thinking during their moments of new awareness as they participate in the experience.

## **Synergy**

Synergy with others is an experience unattainable when one is alone with a textbook. An interactive process, synergy is a goal and a natural outcome of many experiential learning approaches—something that cannot be experienced any other way. Experiential approaches that involve teams, project groups, or other collaboration tap not only the individual's curiosity and awareness, but also the collective knowledge and experience of the group. Appreciation of varying perspectives, combinations of ideas, acknowledgment of different

styles of learning and relating, creativity and innovation are all outcomes of synergistic activities within the experiential approach.

Synergy taps into human beings' need for affiliation with others (Abraham Maslow) and helps confirm that an individual's perspective is in alignment with that of his/her peers. Activities that promote synergy also reinforce the participants' individual perspectives by revealing the similar perspectives of the others in the group. The group members thus validate each other. The synergy present in experiential learning helps individuals make sense of the world (Kelly).

### **Energy and Involvement**

Positive or negative energy, high energy or low energy, potential energy and momentum are all aspects strongly associated with an experiential approach. Involving the individual physically as well as mentally forces actions to which require energy. Experiential exercises delivered by experiential teachers, trainers and facilitators share the common elements of "idealized event optimization."

Simply stated, ideal event optimization (Brodeur), consists of a sequence of five steps: **Dream – Plan – Do – Feel – Relate**. The experiential learning approach contains all of these elements. Typically the facilitator will present a problem or situation in which the learner(s) must react and respond with a Dream of the ideal end state—to reach the goal, to solve the problem, to get to the end etc. Once the Dream or end state is clear, a Plan must be developed to achieve the Dream. If the Plan is well developed, it has a chance of achieving the Dream. The next step, the Do or physical action step requires an appropriate level of energy, the correct frequency and constancy of purpose, or unbending intent. The critical Do stage and the energy required to follow through with the plan is where experiential learning really shines. The true perspective and deep understanding created by the experience of really being "in" the activity and experiencing what it takes to persevere and stay on course yields a level of learning never possible in the traditional classroom setting. The tangible nature of this action-oriented learning at the Do stage creates a whole new dimension of understanding for the participant.

The Feel stage of idealized event optimization also has a relationship to individual and group energy. Feelings of satisfaction with executing the plan, of curiosity at the unexpected, and of resentment towards others who don't approach the situation the same way are just a few examples of the myriad of feelings which experiential learning can initiate. This stage is where individual and group learning approaches are validated or condemned, reinforced and added to, or abandoned and disregarded. The experiential learning landscape is rich with feelings that make learning more meaningful.

The Relate or final stage of ideal event optimization takes the learning from the Dream-Plan-Do-Feel and shares it with the world. Ideal partners for event optimization are identified, and the group as a whole benefits from the sum of the individual experiences. The Relate stage is where communities of learning and collective experiential knowledge are created.

## **Empowerment**

Self actualization, a theory made popular by Carl Rogers, has grown increasingly popular, particularly in the U.S. Rogers considered it an indisputable truth that each human being is born with the motivation to actualize his or her potential and thus become a fully functioning individual. Experiential learning exercises popularized by organizations such as Project Adventure, Aquarius Training & Development, University Associates, and many others emphasize creating a learning environment where individuals are given the opportunity to participate to the maximum extent of their abilities. These perspectives have become prevalent in American corporate culture, and are quite observable in the society at large as well.

Teamwork, one of the most common experiential learning objectives, requires emphasis on the value of each participant's point of view. To promote teamwork, specifically structured learning environments are created where there is an expectation of participation. Experiential approaches by design seek to involve everyone at a similar level.

Providing the opportunity for input, creating an expectation of participation, and designing a framework for tangible action-oriented learning environments are some of the unique hallmarks of the experiential approach. Overall, the experiential approach is far superior to traditional methods when the goal is to create opportunities for individuals to experience personal empowerment and for them to progress toward self-actualization.

## **4. The Responsibility of the Experiential**

### **The Vulnerability of the Innocent**

Experiential learning programs pride themselves in delivering unique and original learning situations with which the learner is generally unfamiliar. Exercises and experiences which emphasize discovery or which are designed to create process awareness are often loaded with multi-dimensional learning metaphors, diabolical creativity and surprisingly unexpected learning opportunities. An experienced facilitator might sound quite nonchalant when giving directions for the exercise, but in reality he/she should have a deep understanding of the richly loaded process in which the participants are about to emerge themselves.

Without clear goals and objectives for experiential learning and well-established boundaries for participation, the experiential approach can degrade into a pure process approach with no specific outcomes. It should be remembered that the experiential approach is the means to learning, not the learning itself. Appropriate goals and objectives set ahead of time will ensure that "anything that happens" isn't rationalized as results.

Experiential learning activities put participants in an extremely vulnerable environment, and individual behaviors can stand out in great relief when compared with others. Appropriate context, equitable guidelines for all participants, and the ever-present option not to participate if something is uncomfortable can go a long way in making the decision to participate easier. Skill in tact and discretion, good judgment and professional facilitation techniques are essential in creating an environment of comfort and safety for participants.

Learners who don't feel ambushed by ongoing surprises are usually willing to keep trying new things.

### **A Word of Caution**

Experiential learning can be powerful. As many experiential program providers will tell you, there are often unexpectedly good outcomes, intensely emotional results, and breakthroughs in everything from organizational effectiveness and productivity to individual socialization, physical performance and goal achievement. As positive as these experiential benefits are, there is also the potential for negative effects if experiential programming goes awry. Personal psychological trauma, negative impacts to group dynamics, conflict and resentment, loss of face or stature in a group, and waste of the time and investment of the experiential activities are all certainly possible.

### **Getting Started in the Experiential**

Using experiential methodologies is not hard, and there are many good books on the subject available now. These books describe experiential exercises designed to be delivered indoors or out, suitable for youth or adults, and appropriate for situations that range from chemical dependency treatment centers to programs for tomorrow's leaders. The national organization Association for Experiential Education is already more than twenty years old, having started with a few creative teachers and outdoor adventure enthusiasts and growing to an internationally focused organization with thousands of members. This organization is a wonderful resource for anyone interested in the latest techniques, exercises, approaches, and a running dialogue about how to positively impact learning through the experiential approach. Their annual conferences are recognized for providing exceptional growth opportunities for anyone interested in the experiential movement.

The experiential approach lends itself to many situations. Young college students and other novices find themselves suddenly in charge of leading corporate training experiences. Individuals who have never met a deaf person guide a group of deaf individuals through an outdoor-based teamwork and leadership training. A weekend volunteer program leader leads a problem-solving workshop for teenage offenders. An American Indian facilitates a combination outdoor education and cultural awareness seminar for a group of foreign students from 12 countries.

Expertise in experiential learning gives you license. A few colleges actually offer programs where experiential learning/training is the focus of the degree, but by and large the field is led by passionate amateurs. This fact is not pointed out to label practitioners as non-professionals but to acknowledge how easy it is to pick up experiential learning approaches and methodology. Although relatively few provide experiential learning experiences as their sole avocation, there are many practicing part time advocates who look for any chance they can to lead or facilitate an experiential learning experience.

### **The Sledgehammer or DaVinci's Paintbrush**

Success or failure of experiential learning often resides with the facilitator, teacher, or program leader delivering the learning. The difference between helping individuals see how

their behavior might have a more positive effect on others with a new approach and giving them a thorough ‘dressing down’ in front of their peers is solely one of approach. Good facilitation means being tactful, diplomatic, and catering to the unique needs of the individual while managing the learning needs of the group so that all remain included and on board. A talented facilitator knows how to lead group discussions, how to ask the right questions, and how to question rather than lecture. He/she also knows when to introduce tools and skills and when to sit back and just let the process take its course.

Good facilitation of experiential learning is considered an art. Many facilitators continuously refine their skills even though they have been using the approach for years. Facilitators are also well known for having deep bags of tricks from which they may draw just the right example, tool, skill or process to accelerate learning.

### **Nowhere to Hide from the Multi-dimensional Metaphor**

Once an experiential exercise has begun and participants are involved, all are subject to the many dimensions of learning that can take place. The use of metaphor in experiential learning activities is widely embraced by facilitators, who choose specific exercises because of their similarities to issues in the real life situations of the participants. Whether the activity involves values clarification, team project management, communication, leadership behavior, conflict resolution, or other objectives, the metaphor is a time-tested tool of the experiential practitioner.

Metaphorical learning is favored by experiential facilitators because of its ability to identify ways that individuals behave in situations similar to real life without forcing them to experience the penalty factors of the actual experience. A simulation where individuals take on specific roles allows the learners to behave either differently or similarly than they usually do. They can then observe the dynamics that they are used to seeing in their real world of work or home, but this time experiencing them from a different perspective. The experiential approach emphasizes transference of the insights gained in these simulations to real life situations, with learners now using their new awareness to change their own behaviors and make better choices.

Although participants may make their own judgments about how accurately each exercise reflects their own real world situation, this type of metaphorical learning will ring true with the majority of participants if the facilitator has designed the learning well. It is hard to hide from the metaphorical process dynamic when participating in a well-designed experiential exercise with your peers. The global scope, symbolism, and penetration of the metaphor stimulate learning on many levels.

## **5. The Secret of the Experiential**

### **A Process—Not an Information Dump**

Experiential learning, by its very nature is much more than a downloading of information. Experiential learning takes students on a journey where they discover rather than receive knowledge. The experience is that of active rather than passive learning. The facilitator

guides the individual or group to a place where significant learning events can happen and which will stimulate learners to come up with their own conclusions and insights.

Certainly experiential learning can be supplemented by other resources and approaches, but additional learning content will receive much greater acceptance after the fundamentals and foundations have been laid through a more participatory learning experience. Textbooks, references, case studies, and even the dreaded didactic lecture fall into better perspective once fundamentals are understood through experience.

### **Acting Like It's The First Time Every Time**

The facilitator (no other term seems as appropriate in describing the leadership and guidance function in the experiential approach) who plays a large role in structuring the learning format knows only too well the results that will be produced by the learning experience. Unsuspecting learners who are fully immersed soon discover the interesting twists and turns in the road, front-loaded group dynamics, and the often-delightful discovery of more than they bargained for!

The well-designed, seemingly innocent experiential assignment or exercise description quickly reveals learning implications the learner had not anticipated. A wise facilitator takes pains to set the stage for an activity as well the hundredth time he delivers it as he did the first!

### **Resistance Makes the Sauce Richer**

Resistance to the process generally serves to make the learning stand out in even greater relief. In particular, group dynamics and teamwork-focused exercises are particularly effective when individuals voice dissatisfaction and resistance. Resistant behaviors can help identify issues or problems between individuals and the rest of the group. A skilled facilitator can turn an individual's resistance into valuable learning for everyone. Sometimes, however, individual resistance points to an individual who doesn't belong on the team. In such a case, most team members will be relieved if the individual leaves the group, but please note that exclusion of group members is not a stated objective of experiential programming.

More often such individuals will get some much-needed feedback, perhaps for the first time in their lives, on how their behaviors affect other group members. The revealed feelings of the group can be a powerful incentive for any individual to change.

### **The Best Way To Approach Resistant Learners**

When individuals are resistant to particular learning concepts or themes, an experiential exercise may be just the opportunity to get through to them. When other attempts have failed to produce the desired result, a resistant student might find a more personal and meaningful role in an experiential exercise. As participants dive into the learning in an active physical way, they often tap into an alternate set of motivators. Since participants often do not expect to gain any benefit from participating, the "sneakiness of the experiential" can accomplish the objective in an unexpected way.

## **Whatever Happens Is Part Of The Process**

Whether participants appreciate it or not, every part of experiential learning creates awareness and knowledge. Not getting the problem solved or reaching only point B instead of point E is a lesson just as valuable as if the participants had “succeeded,” and sometimes even more so. Participants continually take stock of their thought processes, decisions, actions and approach while healthy experimentation is always encouraged.

When processes are approached in a natural and dynamic way, much ancillary learning takes place as participants evaluate their performance in front of the group, demonstrate appreciation for other individuals, and rise to new levels of creativity and innovation. The experiential learning approach always holds the possibility of something new and special happening. Each experiential learning opportunity is completely unique, often creating as much fascination, amazement and joy for the facilitator as for the participant.

## **6. The Integration of the Experiential**

### **Intellectual**

Experiential learning approaches have been used to teach everything from outdoor education to world-class leadership. As for the intellectual process, it works best when the individual is engaged on many levels. That part of our brains that is responsible for strict memorization or didactic learning is very small compared to the rest of our brain which processes all of the sense data input from an experiential activity. Thinking, in an intellectual sense, is not limited to recall and memorization, but to logical relationships, comparison, visualization, experimentation, theory, questioning, filtering, testing assumptions, pretending, projecting, identifying patterns, utilizing alternate mental models, thinking outside the box and asking “What if?”

The experiential approach wins hands down in the contest of brain involvement. Intellectual involvement is not only richer, but much more appropriate for developing the thinking and problem-solving abilities we need in everyday life. The experiential learner is likely to be a much more well-rounded thinker who has enhanced coping skills.

### **Physical**

Experiential learning is inherently more physical than sitting in a traditional classroom. Standing up, moving around, going there and seeing it, feeling what it feels like, hearing the real sounds, tasting the experience—all create indelible personal impressions which make the learning much more intense and memorable. The ever popular experiential ‘ropes course’ programs strive to create highly energized “high element” individual and partnered challenges designed to require group members to pull together and support one another, the obvious perception being that pulling together is required for survival.

Ropes courses and high adventure experiences such as climbing and river running are particularly effective metaphorical teaching tools for diverse topics such as personal self reliance, coaching, trust, support, and stretching your own abilities with the help of others. Without the physical component, such subjects would be a dry intellectual exercise. This

physical element also allows participants to do things they may never have even considered before.

## **Emotional**

With intellectual reasoning one arrives at logical, rational conclusions while emotional reasoning results in action charged with or motivated by feelings. Much of the work of experiential practitioners is to create learning experiences where emotions will play a role in human behavior. Facilitating logical awareness is one thing, facilitating emotional commitment is quite another. Well-designed experiential programming (structured learning experiences) will purposely create opportunities for emotionally charged values clarification and intense group decision-making. Artificial pressures add to the experience through elements such as time constraints and difficult-to-attain goals. Rotating leadership, creating competition between groups, and designating particular individuals to personally challenging roles all help to focus participants' complete attention on the learning experience.

Emotion, when carefully invoked by the facilitator or the experience itself, can help create the "buy in" needed for full involvement by the participants and will intensify the learning.

## **Spiritual**

Whether one believes in God or not is certainly not the question here, but it is interesting to note how many ministries are migrating toward experiential programming. Religious camps and conference centers are building ropes courses (the most popular format for experiential training and development). Religious retreats are often designed with a large component of experiential learning for special groups as diverse as youth, newlyweds and the clergy themselves. Experiential learning approaches can create the opportunity for work on values clarification and altruistic behavior towards others; and experiential activities such as role playing exercises of all kinds can be used to promote compassion, empathy, personal fortitude and leadership behavior—all topics strongly associated with many God-centered movements. But what about using an experiential learning approach to strengthen one's own relationship with God?

Often a taboo subject in educational institutions, experiential learning offers many ways to delve personally into one's relationship with the almighty. Devotion, meditation and prayer opportunities can be interspersed throughout the program to provide opportunities for personal inventory and self analysis, and to create experiences where participants are encouraged to draw upon their faith in the Almighty. Religious programs of all kinds are embracing experiential learning as an opportunity to "get through" to individuals and to positively influence their spirituality. From twelve-step programs to high-end, well-funded evangelical camps for youth, experiential learning techniques have gained a well-deserved reputation as being a powerful tool set to help stimulate and foster spiritual growth.

## **The Awareness Of The Experiential—You Can Run But You Can't Hide**

Being "in" the well-designed experiential activity should be totally encompassing, especially in a group dynamic. Whether or not you are learning, the chances are that someone

else is. As other participants around you increasingly find value in the process, the peer pressure to learn is unavoidable. Regardless of whether you agree with the conclusions of the other learners in the experience or buy into the course of action taken by the group in a team problem solving exercise or group project, something will be learned when humans apply themselves together. Difference of views during an experience is also considered learning, whether it's an individual's disagreement with the group or the group's disagreement with a particular individual.

## **7. The Science of the Experiential**

### **Doing First**

“What happens when you don't see it and can't think it up? Just do it!” so say Henry Mintzberg and Frances Westley in their work on decision-making. Their explorations into the dynamics of this subject (featured in Sloan Management Review as well as other journals) reinforce the idea that purely rational decision making is not only a limited approach, but is actually less common than those approaches which integrate an experiential “doing first” methodology. They support the notion that when pragmatic people are stymied, they get on with it; believing that if they just do something, the necessary thinking will follow. It's pure experimentation—trying something in order to learn.

Another “doing first” theory was popularized by organizational-behavior professor, Karl Weick. It goes something like this: enactment—selection—retention. This method involves experimenting with various approaches, making sense of them, repeating the successful ones and discarding the rest. Thinking may drive doing, but doing just as surely drives thinking. We don't just think in order to act; we act in order to think.<sup>1</sup>

1. MIT Sloan Management Review Spring 2001 Vol, 42 No. 3 pg. 91-92

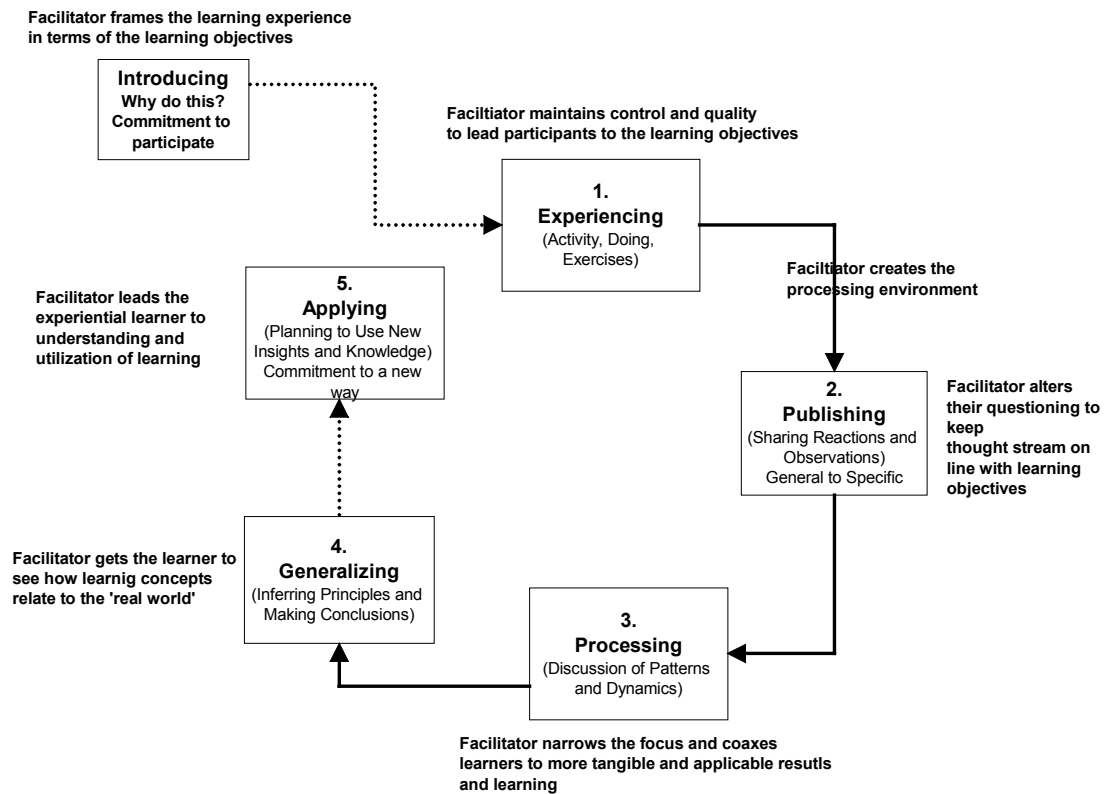
### **Experiential Learning Allows For Unanticipated Questions**

Thinking before acting has merit, but it should not be focused exclusively on problem solving scenarios. When the situation is novel or confusing, when complicated specifications would get in the way or when a few simple relationships rules can help people move forward, then the experiential approach should be initiated. The act of doing will increase actual awareness, not just theoretical awareness. Since not even the smartest among us can think of everything ahead of time, taking action can reveal new perspectives and unanticipated questions and allow the situation to be examined from a variety of perspectives. While the experiential process is engaged, participants in the learning process increasingly become more equal in terms of their input into the problem-making process. When no one knows the answer, anyone is free to voice an idea. Since new and creative innovations lie outside of the normal experience, the experiential approach can often uncover them.

### **Yes, There Is Structure**

All of this talk regarding the seemingly unlimited potential of the experiential learning process may set off warning signals with the academics among us who like to rely on well-defined approaches and processes. To view the experiential approach as unstructured is to grossly misunderstand it. There is a common approach to experiential learning that is popular

with experiential practitioners everywhere. This model, found in many places with slight variation, effectively describes the steps in experiential learning.



## The Cycle of Experiential Learning

### Anatomy Of An Experiential Activity

#### Introduction

During the introduction of the experiential learning activity, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to put the experience into the appropriate context, to explain the benefits to the learners, and to demonstrate how the experience is valuable and relates to the interests of the learner and the group. Some level of interest and rationale must be sparked in the group so that each person is willing, and hopefully eager, to participate.

When experiential learning is introduced properly, participants will be motivated, interested, curious, or challenged. A skilled facilitator may employ many approaches to stimulate interest—mystery, comedy, promise of impressive benefits or new abilities which will may be gained, the lure of new insights to be discovered or problems that can be solved, or the simple challenge to beat the competition.

Learning should be placed into the proper context with appropriate rules, guidelines and boundaries well established. Setting the structure helps keep the learning on track, creates reasonable expectations and adequately prepares the learner to participate. Experiential exercises which are loosely structured and which do not create their own rationale for participation easily atrophy into unfocused and unorganized chaos of little value.

## **I. Experiencing**

Once an adequate structure is established with rules, timelines, guidelines and boundaries, the facilitator will closely monitor the activity to make sure participants adequately understand what they are doing. It is the role of the facilitator to support initial learning as the activity gains momentum. Additionally the facilitator may:

Support each participant in becoming as involved as possible.

Challenge learning standards.

Add additional conditions or rules to adjust and modify learning.

Correct disruptive or non-functional behavior that is getting in the way of learning.

Freeze the process to add additional questions or perspectives that will cause learners to alter their course of action.

A critical balance must be struck between the facilitator's direct involvement with the learning and pure observation. Teachers and facilitators who just throw learners into an activity and then claim that the participants' struggles are part of the learning process miss the boat. At the experiencing stage, learning should be well organized and well supported with focused learning objectives. The more narrowly focused the learning objectives, the better the learning exercise.

## **II. Publishing**

Sharing reactions and observations from the learning experience comes next. Experiential learners will be anxious to share highlights of the task and will typically want to let off steam related to the activity at the end of the learning experience.

With learning objectives in mind, the facilitator guides the initial reactions with open-ended questioning, giving each participant a chance to voice his/her reaction to the activity. Participants in experiential learning often feel slighted if they are not given the opportunity to vent after an intense exercise.

The skilled facilitator then begins to re-orient the group, moving from a task-focused discussion to a process-focused discussion. This shift will require the experiential learner to think more abstractly. If the experience has been well designed, the more aware participants will jump to the next phase, seeing important relationships between process and results.

## **III. Processing**

At the processing stage the facilitator coaxes the learners to identify patterns and cause/effect relationships and to draw conclusions related to their behavior in the experience. As the discussion proceeds, participants become increasingly more aware of the cause/effect relationship of their own behavior and the results of the activity. Through this process, the learner experiences new perspectives or dimensions.

## **IV. Generalizing**

At this stage of well-delivered experiential learning, the facilitator guides the participants toward identification of learning concepts, insights and real knowledge. From demonstration of the effectiveness of team communication to the nature of a particular chemical combination, participants begin to make the knowledge their own. Theories are advanced, cause/effect relationships are identified, and concepts and ideas are described in detail. This is the appropriate stage of experiential learning to introduce other learning aids, readings, tools, models and skills since participants now have a tangible understanding of the concept through experience.

## **V. Applying**

Knowledge and learning differs as much as each learning audience. At this point, the facilitator attempts to generate a commitment from the participants that they will apply the learning where it will be most effective in their lives. In a corporate work group, this might be a commitment to take new models for problem solving back to the office. In an environmental education course, it might be to begin recycling or try starting a garden. The experiential learning is considered successful if the learners demonstrate the ability to use and apply the new learning and if they are motivated and committed to applying it in their own situations.

### **Pitfalls in the Experiential Activity**

When all of the steps of the experiential learning model described above are not carried out, the value of the learning delivered is diminished. A real danger of experiential learning approaches is that an inexperienced facilitator will not deliver the steps correctly or in the right order or one of these five essential elements will be left out.

Perhaps you can relate to a situation where the introduction to an experience was inadequate or where the facilitator only made it as far as the publishing stage with no processing, generalizing or applying. Maybe you have experienced the “tell it all” facilitator who jumps right to the generalizing and applying stage without doing any publishing or processing. Even worse is when the facilitator jumps around back and forth between these steps and utterly confuses and confounds the group. When learners aren’t satisfied with their learning experience and don’t seem to “get it,” the inexperienced facilitator will probably excuse the failure of the experience by blaming it on an individual or the group.

Another problem is not scheduling enough time to complete the entire cycle. Trying to harness the natural unfolding process of learning experientially is not something easily done in short sessions. Generally the longer the experiential learning session, the better the results.

### **Revealing The Logical Through Cause And Effect**

Another name for experiential learning could be “cause and effect” learning. There is no real substitute for discovering for yourself or with your group that doing X will produce Y. Experiential learning embraces the best of the scientific method—experimentation with immediate feedback—it is hard to deny the results you just participated in creating. For this reason, more than any other, experiential learning is effective. Experimentation is one of the keys to creativity. Commonalities and relationships are often revealed only when examined through the cause and effect perspective. The skilled facilitator, once again, will guide

experiential learning participants in helping to identify why they got the results they did if it is not otherwise apparent.

### **Pre And Post Measurement**

Experiential learning goes beyond the theoretical/logical/problem-solving-on-paper process. Actual pre and post measurements can be taken that not only analyze the main causes but all of the root causes and contributing factors as well. Such realistic measurement will always reveal more when the learning has been accomplished experientially.

### **Theories Advanced**

Proving a theory through research and accessing the work of previous scholars is certainly laudable, but theories which can actually be demonstrated and proven will garner just as much if not more respect. Innovative ideas and solutions to problems are often not deemed credible alternatives until they can be field-tested experientially. When even the most outlandish idea is proven through demonstration and experience, the die-hard skeptics have no choice but to accept these new, creative ideas.

### **The Computer And The Experiential**

Technology is pushing on us from all sides. It was revolutionary 25 years ago to consider widespread use of the computer for teaching. The experiential learning community, once considering their methods to be the antithesis of online learning, must face today's reality that computer learning is here to stay.

Rather than making it the enemy, however, many experiential practitioners are taking advantage of technology to use cyber experiences such as online collaborative problem solving, email and video conferencing, computerized surveys and feedback mechanisms that support experiential programs. High tech props and equipment are increasingly graying the edges between the field, the classroom, and technology.

As new technologies such as voice recognition, wireless data streaming and artificial intelligence continue to evolve, experiential facilitators may be competing head-to-head with fully enabled, programmable robotic expert system facilitator. Those days are probably coming sooner than anyone realizes.

## **8. The Risk of the Experiential**

### **Challenging the Individual**

The success and popularity that experiential learning has enjoyed over recent years is due largely to the variety of individual challenge learning experiences that have become the mainstay of thousands of experiential learning companies. For this reason, this particular 'learning modality' is explored in more depth in this chapter. Rock climbing, ropes courses, whitewater, wilderness trekking and solo experiences are just a few of the intense

environments used by experiential educators to put individuals face to face with their own humanity.

Although it is not necessary to risk one's life while learning, these experiences have a unique way of focusing one's attention. While structured for maximum safety with rigorous monitoring of individual well being, these intense personal challenges are still perceived by most participants to be life-or-death scenarios. The learning is metaphorical, but the physical experience is very tangible. With the correct introduction, experience and application of the experiential learning cycle, these personal challenge experiences have been credited on thousands upon thousands of occasions with changing people's lives.

One can certainly argue that the mountain, the ropes course or the river only set the stage and that it was the individual who was responsible for the change. Described below are the interesting components of these activities that are known to enhance learning in the personal challenge experiential approach.

### **Unfamiliar Environment**

Experiential learners who attend an outdoor experiential program are stepping out of their normal existence as a city person, a corporate employee or student and entering a world of adventure where amazing and extraordinary things are possible. The spectacle and majesty of experiences that are dynamic, dramatic and also take place in a beautiful outdoor setting have many natural elements going already. The unfamiliar outdoor environment has no prescribed mode of behavior with socialized feedback mechanisms built in. Learners are effectively free to approach the unfamiliar environment on a whole new set of terms.

### **Unfamiliar Task**

The unfamiliar tasks involved in personal challenge type experiential learning seem daunting at first glance but they continually beckon the learner to consider "What if?"

Curiosity and watching his/her peers take on the challenge at hand with good results often quells an individual's personal reservations about trying something new. Of course, while good facilitation and program leadership is gauging the appropriateness of each experience for the real physical capabilities of each learner, each participant is required to make a true effort that reflects his or her abilities.

Each participant can discover much about his/ her own character when faced with challenge and the unknown. Many experiential facilitators consider this element to be a worthwhile objective in itself.

Much can be written about appropriate levels of personal challenge for program participants, but those decisions must be left up to the individual judgment of the experiential facilitator with full consideration of the learning goals, safety, and capabilities of each learner.

### **A Controlled Universe**

Although it may seem to participants that they are on their own and that all of this is happening for the first time to them, nothing is further from the truth. Personal challenge and risk-oriented (a bad term) programs involve intense training and rigorous preparation for a smoothly functioning learning experience. Typical experiential learning programs feature multi-talented program leaders who are also highly skilled technically, have emergency medicine training, and who drill with their peers regularly to deliver high quality and safe programming.

Although it might seem to participants that they are going to fall to their deaths as they rappel for the first time over the edge of a cliff, the extra safety rope controlled by the facilitator at the top of the cliff and the safety crew member at the bottom create redundant backups for even the most remote accidental possibility.

The levels of professionalism delivered in today's experiential learning programs go far beyond the standards of programming offered even 15 years ago. In depth operating procedures are well documented, there is an accreditation process for program safety and quality, and college and university degree programs are offered for those who desire academic certification of their expertise.

Participants in the experiential learning program, whether held outdoors in the mountains, at a ropes course or in a classroom environment, have the benefit of more preparation, structure and support than ever before. Wide-ranging debates are held in the experiential community on subjects such as appreciating diversity, integrating special populations, political correctness and appreciative inquiry, new approaches to mediation and conflict resolution, emergency evacuation and first aid procedures, technical rescue training and much more. Experiential facilitators are, for the most part, very highly trained educators.

The learning environment, although made to look dramatic for effect, will have its actual dangers substantially minimized through the use of best practice safety procedures and professional program planning. Participants can tell their friends anything they want when they get home, but they are usually safer participating in these individual challenges than they are as they are going about their daily activities.

### **A Simple Problem**

The metaphor-rich experiential environment has the tendency to boil things down to very simple and straightforward problems. Although life is seldom as neatly packaged, experiential exercises have the advantage (and sometimes the audacity) to build in whatever rules, guidelines and boundaries necessary to achieve the desired learning effect. Participants in popular short experiential exercises are often required to participate while blindfolded, without talking, while tied to a partner, in small or large groups, under simulated time pressure or whatever the constraints the facilitator feels are necessary to increase involvement and the effectiveness of learning.

Metaphorical learning challenges are always structured with specific results and learning objectives in mind. Control over the learning landscape allows the facilitator to fine tune the message, to compensate for factors such as an over participative or under participative individual, to force a group to overcome its propensity to act without planning, to remove the

option of taking the easy way out without tapping creativity and innovation, or modify countless other factors to enhance the learning experience.

In terms of risk or perception of risk, challenges in general and how one handles them are often metaphorically summed up in the simplicity of getting to the top of a climbing wall, or taking that first committing step off the zip line. Once obstacles are overcome and the mission accomplished, the message is clear: If I can do this, then I can accomplish anything!

### **Reinforcement of the Formula for Success**

Personal challenge learning experiences reinforce the elements of success. Besides the Dream-Plan-Do-Feel-Relate sequence mentioned earlier, the mountain climbing metaphor is another often-quoted sequence that describes an individual's ability to overcome difficulties in all aspects of his/her life:

- The courage to take on the challenge
- The commitment to begin
- The perseverance to reach the top
- The celebration on the summit—a victory you own that no one can ever take away from you.

Repetition of this formula learned in experiential risk challenge activities is a healthy process that pays off with incalculable personal benefit throughout one's life—not exactly the kind of personal growth one could experience from a dry classroom lecture!

### **Validation of the Individual**

Participants who challenge themselves through experiential learning at some point compare themselves with others. Experiential facilitators are continuously asked, "How did the group from XYZ Company do?" Participants cheer themselves on with remarks like "If Suzy Jones from the customer service can do it, then so can I!"

Dramatically appearing challenges such as those on a ropes course look daunting indeed, but participants soon discover that success is not beyond their reach; and that in fact they have what it takes. In this process personal doubt, fear and anxiety are overcome. Performance should always be positively reinforced in well-designed experiential learning challenges, and there should be recognition of the individual's standards for performance as well as that of the group's.

An argument can be made that it is acceptable for experiential challenges to be rigged or set up for individual success, but if so, the overall learning goals and objectives must be kept in mind. The decision to set up an activity in a certain way should rest solely with the facilitator. Typically experiential programs aim to find an appropriate level of individual challenge where which each person can stretch a little or a lot and all can feel that they have accomplished something. Growth, after all, is one of the most interesting things about being alive and will always capture the interest of the individual learner.

### **Exploring the Edge of the Envelope**

Taking artistic license with the growth of each individual is a big responsibility. What makes the experiential facilitators so compelling as educators is their uncanny ability to adjust the learning experience to the particular learning needs of each individual. Individualizing the experience for each participant is a great capability that is often impossible in a traditional learning environment. The experiential facilitator has a much greater scope of activity, choice of tools and approaches and control over the learning process and thus has the potential to give each person exactly the experience he or she needs.

Although the facilitator takes great care not to push or coerce individual learners beyond their capabilities, often no one knows where the edge of the learning envelope lies. Some degree of experimentation and discovery in this regard goes on throughout the activity. Each facilitator must be a kind of detective, trying to discover not only what each individual needs, but how to get at it with a unique and individualized approach—an approach that allows each person's intrinsic motivations and interest to come out. These challenges aren't limited solely to the realm of experiential education, but their use in the experiential context is much more multi-dimensional in scope. The experiential learning laboratory creates an environment for expansion of the self.

### **Mentioning The Unmentionable**

The experiential group dynamic, when properly facilitated, becomes a level playing field where all team members can face issues, problems and concerns together while each individual contributes an essential part. This can be perceived by introverts and others as a high-risk environment, but a closer look shows that this type of activity represents a real opportunity for growth. Often this is the only environment, (complete with facilitator/referee) where sensitive topics of concern to group members may come out into the open for discussion and resolution. In the case of overbearing group members or leaders who aren't usually open to feedback or listening to others, the facilitated experiential learning environment can be particularly effective. By delicately and diplomatically showing the cause/effect relationship of behaving in certain ways, the experiential learning approach works its magic on everyone in the group.

No substitute for therapy or psychoanalysis, experiential learning does share many common elements of a support group. Facilitators must be careful to draw the line where it must be drawn, to separate experiential learning objectives from feedback that is too intense and discussions that might negatively impact any individual group member.

## **9. The Adventure of The Experiential**

### **One Incredible Roller Coaster Ride**

In a typical day of experiential learning delivered by California-based Aquarius Training & Development, a corporate work team, for example, may:

- Define their ideal future in terms of what they feel they are capable of
- Define what their customers expect of them
- Define what it will take for all members of the team to be satisfied with each other
- Define the positive and negative impacts of teamwork

- Personally assess the strengths and weaknesses of their team
- Learn and practice team problem solving skills
- Learn and practice team communication norms
- Learn the elements of effective collaborative planning
- Clarify their values
- Focus on meeting skills and conflict resolution
- Develop their own models for effective leadership and decision making
- Learn about continuous improvement, creativity, and innovation
- Use large-scale organizational simulations to integrate many of these topics and themes in a project management environment
- Participate in peer feedback exercises
- Build trust between group members
- Partner with each another to deepen relationships and foster encouragement and support
- Experience the thrills and chills of a high adventure ropes course with repeated coaching, encouragement and support from fellow team members
- Experience group bonding in a high-energy environment
- Commit to the application of experiential learning lessons once back in the workplace
- Develop an action agenda and process improvement plan for immediate implementation

All this really happens in a typical single day of experiential training and development. Participants in this program regularly share testimonials that this is “one of the most powerful programs I have ever experienced,” “My favorite training program ever,” etc. The agenda is aggressive and loaded with powerful components for learning and development. This one-day experience has continued to be successful for the past 18 years precisely because of the richness of the experience. There are many similar programs being offered nationwide. Experiential learning hits the individual on multiple levels simultaneously with surprises around every corner. This is true adventure in every sense of the word, with the ever-present possibility of discovering rich treasures of insight and personal growth in the next part of the exercise.

### **The Unlimited Potential of the Experiential**

Experiential approaches can be developed to teach just about any subject with any set of potential outcomes. A little imagination and creativity combined with good judgment can create whole new approaches to old, tired subjects typically dreaded by the students. In California, Teacher of the Year awards are given to the most innovative and fresh-thinking educators who have created great results through the implementation of some new methodology. Nearly always, these master teachers are using experiential learning approaches that involve their students to a much greater extent than ever before. The experiential method is indeed the preferred approach for learning and should be applied first as the teaching technique of choice, not as an afterthought.

### **Culture Is No Boundary**

In my experiential learning career, I have facilitated team development and ropes course programs in several different countries and cultures. It can be definitively stated that there

are no cultural boundaries or differences that limit the use of experiential training and development. When facilitating such programs in other cultures, the experiential learning cycle, applied objectively, proves itself effective time and time again. The experience of personal growth also knows no cultural boundaries. People of all cultures are more similar in their reactions to experiential learning than they are different.

### **The Tougher The Better**

As experiential facilitators become more dexterous with the use of dynamic exercises and tools, they seek out greater challenges to apply their skills with varied audiences. Here is a sample of groups with whom I have successfully used an experiential learning approach:

Breast Cancer Survivors  
Military Commands, Squads, Teams, Units, Of All Kinds  
Youth At Risk  
Adult Offenders  
Information Technology Departments  
Corporate Sales Teams  
Executive Teams  
Human Resource Departments  
Consultants  
Elected Officials  
Manufacturing Personnel  
Chambers Of Commerce  
Central Intelligence Agency  
School Children Of All Ages  
Movie Stars  
The Blind  
Intercultural Cooperation Between Mexican/Japanese/American Joint Ventures  
The Deaf  
Korean Corporate Managers And Employees  
Mexican Corporate Managers And Employees  
Costa Rican Corporate Managers And Employees  
Special Education Groups  
International Students From 50+ Countries (in the same class together)  
Police  
Firemen  
Environmental Compliance Officers  
Zoo Workers And Veterinarians  
Pilots  
Fishermen

The point here is that every group presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities, but we are all human beings. There are no groups which I feel which would not benefit from the experiential learning approach.

### **10. The Intention of the Experiential**

## **Compassionately Working The Agenda**

Much has been said about the importance of a competent facilitator who has clear goals and objectives and a consistent methodology. With that said, credit should be given to these marvelous individuals who act so altruistically for the betterment of the learner. It takes a great deal of compassion and an extraordinary understanding of human nature to make experiential learning work for everyone involved. To ask high leverage questions during discussions, to structure learning challenges appropriately, to challenge individuals on their behaviors without offending them or turning them off to the process, to have confidence in your own direction and agenda even if it disagrees with the stated objectives of a client whose motives you question, to press for more, to challenge the learner, to ask for commitment to new behavior, to have the patience to keep working until learning is accomplished—all these skills and countless more are required of the committed experiential educator.

Experiential learning is not an intricately prepared lesson plan, but is more the creation of a dynamically managed environment where the skill and dedication of the facilitator is essential. Without good facilitation and the commitment to effective multi-dimensional management of the learning environment, an experiential learning program will not succeed. The thousands of large and small decisions, process adjustments, rule changes, discussion points, and learning emphasis the facilitator regularly considers in any one hour of experiential programming is truly amazing. Underlying it all, however, is the desire to do good, to help humans learn and grow, and to help ensure that something special happens for everyone in the process.

## **The Joy of the Experiential**

Human beings are fascinating creatures. One never knows what they will do, how they will react, or what they might be capable of. To educate in an open-ended learning environment where the unexpected can happen is truly amazing. In the traditional academic setting, much of the richness and color on the learning journey is missed. What makes experiential learning so rich is the human interaction involved in the discovery process. The closet social scientist in all of us cannot help but appreciate how a random collection of individuals, thrown together to solve a problem, together will generate mind-bending ideas, approaches, and creative solutions never before imagined.

People are capable of so much. Everyday routine existence does not always offer the opportunity to venture into realms of new learning. Experiential learning brings out the humanity in each of us because we are asked to not only think about something but to participate in it. Suddenly the concept is tangible, the results not just imagined, but sitting right there in front of us, and each of us is richer for having made the journey.

Rheinhold Messner, the first mountain climber to climb all 14 of the world's 8,000 meter peaks, including Everest, K-2, and Kachenjunga said, "Unless you are standing at the bottom of the mountain wondering whether or not you have what it takes to get to the top, then it's not the right mountain for you."

## **Facilitators Gain As Much As The Participants**

The facilitator of experiential learning often gets more from leading the experience than the participant does. Feelings of satisfaction, joy, surprise, amazement and wonder are relatively common experiences for the experiential learning facilitator. It is truly a rewarding avocation that yields much in the way of validation and personal acknowledgement. What keeps many facilitators dedicated to this approach are the repeated heartfelt and gratifying experiences that are so common in experiential learning. There is no better work than helping human beings learn and grow.

### **Individual Will To Self Actualize**

The goal of experiential learning is not only to learn the subject matter presented, but also to enjoy the experience of actually learning while gaining a greater appreciation of your capabilities as a human being. There is no denying that these “aha experiences” happen more often and in much more definitive ways with the experiential learning approach. It is easy to understand why learners prefer to learn experientially, find that they integrate learning more quickly and at much deeper levels and discover that what they have learned has far greater relevance and utility.

## **11. The Future of the Experiential**

### **The Edge of the Experiential**

What are the benchmarks? Experiential learning continues to saturate every vestige of traditional education, and it is interesting to notice the new areas where it is continuously being applied. Here are other surprising areas where experiential practitioners are working now:

- Experiential Education To Find Commonality Of Religious Beliefs.
- Experiential Education To Teach International Economics
- Experiential Education To Teach Globalization In Post Secondary Education
- Experiential Education As A Vehicle For Change In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- Experiential Education As A Vehicle For Educational Reform
- Experiential Education To Teach (Explore) Ethics And Morals
- Experiential Learning To Promote World Peace
- Experiential Education To Teach Strategic Management
- Experiential Education To Teach Experimental Social Psychology
- Experiential Education To Explore Growth In Self Esteem
- Experiential Education To Explore Women’s Issues
- Experiential Education To Teach Environmental Awareness And Ecology

This list could go on for many pages.

### **What Are The Limits Of Experiential Learning?**

There are probably studies somewhere that prove why we should all be learning by sitting in dull classrooms while being lectured at, performing rote memorization with little real human interaction. While such studies may exist, I have wasted no time in searching them out, because—let’s face it—who wants to learn that way anyhow?

## **The Destiny Of Experiential Learning**

Maybe the proponents of academic rigor will stage a revolt and put down this revolution in learning. But maybe, instead, they will get busy examining their own curriculums and finding new ways to break up the monotony, to make learning more interactive and action oriented, to create truly meaningful exercises and experiences which require more of the learner than parroting back answers from a textbook.

Experiential learning is not the answer to everything as I may have made it sound in this treatise, but it is the answer to a many educational challenges. It is my firm belief that experiential learning represents the future of learning, and that we are really just beginning to understand how humans prefer to learn. There are successes and real progress in many areas of traditional and not-so-traditional education, and these steps forward need to be synthesized and integrated so that best practices can be shared with all. Probably at some point the development curve of experiential learning and all of its radical social implications will converge with the fast paced curve of technology. When that happens, watch out! Then we will really have something. Imagine that sometime in the near future we have discovered the critical elements of how human beings learn best, and then we apply our most progressive technologies to optimize those approaches! That's really going to be exciting!