A Student-Centered Approach to Teaching: A Study of the use of Workshops and the Reflective Journal

C. Linda Laing
Queensland University of Technology,
Australia

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical reflection on the use of experiential learning in the form of the reflective journal and its ability to contribute to student learning. Three questionnaires were administered over the semester to track the responses of the students undertaking an undergraduate capstone unit in the Human Resource discipline. The questionnaires were designed to elicit feedback regarding the use of the workshop approach to teaching and to promote the use of reflective practices to enhance the learning process. The findings are that students were unfamiliar with the use of reflective journals and had difficulty adjusting to a learning environment that differed from the traditional structured approach which they had come to accept and expect. The use of the workshop designed to provide a student-centered learning environment was initially resisted by the students and debriefing sessions were required to reinforce the value of the reflective journal as part of the learning process.

Key words: *Student-centered learning; experiential learning; workshops; reflective journal.*

Introduction

The teaching approach to Human Resource Management (HRM) is commonly based on a social science paradigm where reality is shaped and focused by the theorists and authors who documented its origins and this in turn is grounded in the Western way of 'teaching how to manage', using a traditional lecture theatre format (Carlopio & Andrewartha, 2008). This approach is reflected in the evolution of the scholarship of management education, which has its origins in the Journal of Management Education which was established in 1974, with an emphasis that was instructional in orientation, centered in organisational sciences and teacher focused (Gallos, 2008).

To further complicate teaching in a general sense the shelf life of knowledge has become so short that what is being taught in management is almost obsolete by the time it is presented (Oliver & McLoughlin, 2000). In today's dynamic environment managers are required to make decisions based on knowledge combined with the ability to analyses a situation in order to make informed choices, not just performing routine tasks. As a result, there is pressure on academic staff to employ teaching approaches that encourage deeper levels of learning which encompass cognitive processes such as complex thinking, sound judgment, and reflective action. Student-centered learning is an approach aligned with constructivism as they encourage forms of self-directed study and experiential learning (Krahenbuhl, 2016).

The concept of experiential learning is regarded as an appropriate teaching approach because it supports the fundamental notion that *"Learning is taking place all the time – perhaps implicitly, perhaps haphazardly-as part of a manager's day to day work and life activities"* (Stuart, 1984, pg.13). A review of the literature indicates that there are varios interpretations given to the term experiential learning. According to Specht and Sandlin (1991) it is a structured activity in which material and principles that are encountered are integrated and applied to new situations. Alternatively, it may be as simple as rearranging the chairs into circle to encourage dialogue between students, or it may be more involved such as engaging in a student directed class room experience (Breunig, 2005). However, the common theme in the literature suggests that experiential learning must convey to the learners that they have the capability of using this new knowledge not only in the classroom in which they learn it but in other settings as well (Leaderman, 1992). Experiential activities in Management education include syndicate work, case studies, practical exercises, soft skills activities as well as role plays (Webb, 2006). A key element of experiential learning, and forms the basis of the students journal, is the creation and interpretation of a personal experience (Usher, cited by Boud, Cohen & Walker 1996).

Of all the experiential models, Kolb's learning cycle has been the most influential in management development and education (Vince, 1998). Kolb (1984) suggested that learning occurs in a variety of categories, from experience to abstract conceptualization, and from reflection to active testing. These categories may be seen as stages in an ongoing cycle of learning that integrates knowing and doing (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988). In this way, Kolb's learning cycle has come to be used in management education as a means of expressing both the importance of experiential knowledge and the link between theory and practice (Vince, 1998).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the teaching approach employed in a Human resource management course/unit contributes to a learning context which encourages experiential learning and reflection.

A key outcome of this course is for the students to develop increased self awareness of their managerial skills and what they may be doing (intent) and how they actually come across (impact). Therefore the approach used in the workshop also has

strong links to the early work of Argyris and Schön (1974) who explored the intersections between knowing and doing.

For example, the students are given role plays which draw on their experience and knowledge gained from previous units, thus requiring them to utilise problem solving skills and judgement. In the class, the espoused theory is revisited whilst the reflection and debriefing occurs on the 'theory in practice'. This is based on the work of Argyris & Schön (1974) who posit the existence of a flexible yet detailed construct form which professionals make decisions. This theory suggests there is a mismatch between the 'espoused theory' and the 'theory in use', whereby the former is a theoretical framework or set of assumptions and the latter describes what one actually does in a particular situation.   According to Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) focusing on points of dissonance – between theory and practice encourages students to rethink their knowledge, reshape their doing, and bring knowledge and action closer. With careful facilitation the dissonance of this "new information crashing in on old ignorance" (Frick, 1977) can help the student towards greater self awareness and an ability to assess different perspectives.

However, for some, the experience evokes fear, anxiety and doubt which can discourage learning (Vince, 1998). There may be an assumption implicitly embedded in the concept of experiential learning that suggests students are open to experience, and not defended against it. Behaviour emerges out of deeply held patterns and unconscious processes that both encourage and discourage learning from experience. According to Vince (1998) it is defensiveness or denial of experience that often gets ignored in the education environment. Some individuals become defensive or protective when encountering information that is inconsistent with their self concept and '*fear finding out that we are not all we would like to be*' (Carlopio, Andrewartha, & Armstrong, 2001, pg.62). Piaget (cited by Wilson & Beard, 2003) claimed that sometimes a response to an experience is to find it so alien to our expectations or way of seeing the world, that we reject it as being atypical, biased or incorrect. Basically, because we have such powerful cognitive filters which are part of our mindset it may result in mental blind spots that prevent us from seeing things that are right in front of us! Research (citied by Wheeler & McLeod, 2002) suggests that under conditions of stress, or threat, we rely on well learnt responses (regardless if these responses fit the situation) and become inflexible, resulting in reduced performance effectiveness. In addition, research (cited by Entwistle, 1986) suggests that experiential learning in higher education is met with resistance from the students themselves. Adults are often resistant to the idea that they can learn from their own experience (Usher, 1985).

Vince (1998) suggests a teacher needs to work with these fears, doubts and anxieties causing defensiveness and discouraging learning. Boud and Walker (1998) suggest the teacher needs to establish a climate for reflection. While Walter and Marks (1981) claim that a teacher should follow a number of processes to establish a supportive climate. According to Albert Einstein (cited by Walter & Mark, 1981) *"I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they learn".* To follow Einstein's advice, I need to create a climate that supports the reflective process and establishes trust, acceptance, appropriate risk taking and mutual respect for others (Knapp, 1992).

Method

Data was collected using a number of questionnaires administered to two undergraduate classes of the Personal and Professional Development unit which, consist of approximately 50 students. A range of questions were developed aimed at eliciting responses to the characteristics identified as relevant in the literature. Three questionnaires were disturbed in the classes over first semester 2009. The questionnaires were conducted in weeks 6, 8 and 10 at the end of each class. In

addition, observational feedback was sought from a critical friend (associate in the School) using a checklist which also followed the issues raised in the literature. In addition, in week 13, the subjects were asked to provide comments on their experience in this class over the semester.

Measures

Questionnaires

In week six a questionnaire was distributed at the end of the class. The questionnaire will comprise three open-ended questions based on the style used within the Harvard one minute essays. At this point, the questions will focus on general impressions pertaining to how the students believe they are coping with the content and process used in the unit, that is, to identify what is and isn't working. This general feedback will be used to make changes to my teaching practice in the unit on a needs basis. The questionnaires were anonymous and asked:
1. What is working for you in this unit?
    a. Consider both content and how the class is facilitated.

2. What is not working for you?
    a. Consider both content and how the class is facilitated.

3. What would you like to see in this unit?

In weeks eight and ten, the questionnaires comprised four questions based on Brookfield's (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire which asked the students to identify specific concrete events significant to them. These questionnaires were also anonymous and asked:
1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel

    a) you were encouraged to learn something personally relevant?

    b) most distanced from what was happening?

2   What action did anyone, either student or teacher take that
    a) encouraged and

    b) enabled (made possible) for you to discover insights into your own behaviour?

The above questions are also consistent with the activities as per Boud and Walker (1998) that a teacher needs to do establish a climate for reflection. That is, the teacher needs to be aware of what they can and can't do, they develop trusting relationship, encourage learners to create their own meaning rather than have it imposed upon them as well as creating and respecting boundaries of the learner.

Unit Context

I teach in the unit Personal and Professional Development (P&PD). This capstone unit has been developed for the purpose of integrating prior course work intended to show students '*how everything fits together'* and '*how to think and make decisions like a senior manager'* (Rapert, Smith, Velliquette, & Garretson, 2004 pg. 24). Whilst, earlier units in this degree focus on building a base of declarative knowledge, to establish a knowledge base, in the capstone unit the intended learning outcomes (ILO's) are based on putting that knowledge to work in a practical context. There is an inter-connectiveness between this unit and the students' prerequisites. Class numbers are capped at 30 to allow an interactive environment to develop. In line with adult learning

theories (Knowles, 1990) the learning takes place as a process of active inquiry. The students are encouraged to reflect on their own experience and identify their own learning's.

Subsequently, the teaching and learning activities (TLA) and ILO's facilitate the acquisition of functioning knowledge. Using Biggs SOLO Taxonomy (2007) the teaching and assessment tasks focus on relational level of understanding, as intended learning requires the students to 'see the world differently' and involves understanding at a high level. As noted by Biggs (1999) it is difficult to separate a TLA from an assessment task. For example, as a teaching activity the students reflect on class activities and complete entries into a journal, which is aligned with the assessment items:

- *To reflect upon the theory presented in class and the activities conducted in class in the context of your personal strengths and developmental areas.*
- *To analyse your feedback and identify your strengths and areas for development and develop a detailed action plan*

The assessment criteria were based on the explicit statement of the learning outcomes, ensuring that both teacher and students perception of expectation and requirements are similar, supporting what Biggs (2007) termed constructive alignment. In addition, the ILO's of this unit are also aligned with the Faculty of Business Assurance of Learning goals which are seen as essential acquisitions for students graduating with a Business degree. This unit targets the development of generic skills in the following area:

- *Identify, research and critically analyse information relevant to a business problem or issue, be able to synthesize that information in order to evaluate potential solutions, make recommendations or otherwise effectively address the problem or issue.*

This integrative approach supports Biggs (2003) notion that teaching takes place in a whole system, embracing classroom, departments and institutional needs.

Analysis

Pattern matching of responses to the open-ended questions was undertaken to establish categories or clusters. The responses from the questionnaires were triangulated against each other and the feedback received from the critical friend in order to support the findings from the pattern matching (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Results

The issue investigated was to identify how my teaching practice can contribute to a learning context which encourages experiential learning and reflection. The results identified a dichotomy of responses from the students. There seemed to be a transition period, from 'teach me' (up until mid-semester) to 'help me learn' (from week 8). Some students may have never progressed from 'teach me'.

Week 6 Feedback

At the end of the workshop in week six students were asked to complete a general feedback questionnaire addressing their general impressions as to how they were coping with the content and process used in the unit, and, identify what was and wasn't working. Student's initial reactions to the workshop seemed to be a mixture of confusion, uncertainty and excitement. Student responses identifying what wasn't working consistently contained *'want more structure and theory'*. In particular, the day class, which comprised of younger, full time students, overwhelmingly wanted clearer guidance on the assessment and more theory. Another common response identified

were concerns over the assessment and the journal. It is also worth noting there were fewer comments on 'process' than on content. This may suggest that either the students have a greater vocabulary for talking about content, or surer of how they felt about it. The students may even be uncertain about how process and content are connected. Whilst there was some comment on what was not working for them, there was little identified other than 'structure'. However, a number of students were inquisitive and interested in an alternative approach to teaching and learning: *"I thought I would enjoy it"* and *''interesting and relevant content that can be related to self and real life situations''*. Many of the responses could be classified as emotive.

Week 8 and 10 Feedback

At the end of the workshops in weeks eight and ten a more specific questionnaire was given to the students to complete anonymously. The students were more forthcoming about a range of things that were 'not working' for them. They were either gaining a vocabulary or felt safe in articulating what was happening for them personally. There were still rumblings regarding structure *"I am used to a step by step and structured learning style".* However, there were an increasing number of positive responses. According to one student *"I'm absolutely thrilled each time when I attend the class as there is lots of information to be absorbed and process during the workshop and class discussion".* This range of opinions suggesting a diversity of experiences occurring in the workshop.

Week 8 Observation and self assessment

An observation checklist derived from the points raised by Walter and Marks (1981) was completed by my critical friend. Feedback from this source suggested that I was using the necessary processes that a teacher should utilize to create a reflective environment. However, I felt Amanda's presence affected the class dynamics. I felt uncomfortable with being observed and wonder if I acted 'normally'. Ultimately, I believe I was consciously trying to emulate those behaviours that would contribute to a supportive learning environment. As a point of interest, I thought the class were also very aware of the observer and participated more than normal. I noticed a number of the students often glancing at Amanda as if to gauge her reaction.

Week 13 Feedback

In week 13 at the completion of the course I asked the students to write feedback based on their initial and final reactions to the workshop. The general response may be captured from a quotation from one student: *"For the first 5 weeks the workshop approach was a little ambiguous. There was a bit of confusion about assessment, context, and expectations. I now like the workshop structure. I prefer the more one on one approach the workshop allows".* Whilst another summed up the confusion felt by many initially: *"it was an intimidating feeling when the realization that such intense self assessment would be the basis of the entire course".*

Evaluation

These were not the results I had been expecting and I was certainly unaware of how the students were feeling! Hussey and Smith (2002, 228-229) argue that "t*he most fruitful and valuable feature of higher education is the emergence of ideas, skills and connections which were unforeseen even by the teacher*." The themes that emerged from the first data collection were confusion, frustration and from some interest. Some students expressed curiosity about the alternative approach finding *"Class participation highly enjoyable"* and *"Interesting and thought provoking"* (anon. Week 6). Of more of a concern were the majority who appeared to be challenged by the workshop approach. These responses may be explained from a number of perspectives. To start, Broeham

(1987) argued that because of years of formal schooling, learners often rely on the 'telling' mode of instruction, and play down their intuitive ways of knowing. Students under the influence of formal schooling tend to resist moving to a different form of teaching especially one that requires them to be active members of the class. The student feedback highlights that some students preferred to cling to their accepted and comfortable conception of teaching and learning. This notion that the students had been institutionalized as to the teacher and student role is supported by Biggs (2007) and resonates in the words of the students. As one student pleaded *"More reference to text"* (anon. week 6). Yet another wrote the *"Workshop style doesn't work for me. I would prefer an hour lecture and two hour tutorial"* (anon. Week 6).

Perhaps their feelings of confusion maybe explained by Perry (1988) who claimed that students have an established schema of cognitive and ethical development. Perry's research showed that students moved though nine 'epistemological positions' or 'ways of knowing'. In the lower positions, the learners view knowledge as consisting of right answers, where truth is discrete, and knowledge as something that is handed down to them by authorities. For those with this view, the teacher and student roles are clear. The teacher is to give the students the truth, the right answer, while the student absorbs and regurgitates the knowledge in an exam. This idea of roles was captured by one student succinctly who wanted me to *"Be more direct with what is required"* (anon. Week 6) while another stated *"I am used to a step by step and structured learning style"* (anon. Week 8). This form of feedback is also consistent with a learner who views the world and teachers, dualistically, a position Two, according to Perry's schema. This view may be consistent with their experience in high school as well as QUT, where Management/ HRM classes tend to be large and held in lecture format. The workshop approach I use in this class places an emphasis on personalized experience, advocating that knowledge is relative and everyone has the right to their opinion. This view, according to Perry (1988) would be around Position five, where knowledge is relative and contexualised, and Position six where knowledge and meaning are tentative. Their unease may be explained by Perry who advocates when students from a lower position are taught in a manner consistent with a higher position, they can panic and retreat. This may have been the experience for one student who found the class *"Confusing and contradicting"* (anon. Week 6).

However, from week eight onwards there seemed to be a shift in their identity, from an anonymous student protesting against or going along with the teacher to an individual with concerns and ways of learning perhaps. This feedback indicated a diversity of concerns and complaints which may be seen as specific and individualized, which may be a signal of personal engagement. A consistent theme in this feedback was the realization that learning could take place through interaction with others, not solely from personal introspection. Students discovered insights into their own behaviour by *"Discussion with friends about the case and their ideas. Challenged my opinions and made me think about things in a different way"* (anon. Week 10) whilst another claimed learning occurred by *"hearing other people's insights".* This suggests that a community of practice began to develop. The students seemed to be learning to become active experience-based learners, and were gaining confidence in that identity. Or perhaps, according to Perry (1988) they were able to view knowledge as being more relative and contexualised *"The role play allowed me to evaluate the effectiveness or lack thereof and consider generating alternative strategies"* and *"After thinking about the conflicts I have been involved in I believe I should approach differently rather than becoming defensive"* (anon. Week 10). I found it ironic when feedback in Week 10 identified some students as being most distanced from the learning when *"the content became too theory focused around the conflict management model"* and *"… being a practical learner I struggle with airy fairy theory".* The feedback in the final class was positive and most felt that they had learnt a lot from the class. One student identified what they had enjoyed about the unit *"Close contact with lecturer. Other class members interacted more than when in large class. Good to learn from others not just*

lecturers". Whilst another noted "*Felt more comfortable with the more open, interactive format throughout the semester. I had to think more than in other tutorials*" (anon. Week 13).

The issue under investigation centered on how my teaching practice can contribute to a learning context which encourages experiential learning and reflection. According to Brookfield (1987) learning involves changing perspectives, shifting paradigms and replacing one way of interpreting the world with another. Yet, this creates a problem as people desire consistency with their beliefs, and any inconsistency or dissonance is stressful (Vecchio, Southey & Hearn (1998.) It would appear that learner dissonance was created when the students were presented with alternatives to their current way of thinking, or to their 'epistemological position' (Perry, 1988) or challenged as to teacher and student roles. Based on the feedback and this discussion it appears that as a teacher I need to explore options to either help students or increase their awareness of the difficulty of the student transition from 'teach me' to 'help me learn'. This approach is based on Shuell's (1986) premise that what the student does is more important to learning than what the teacher does.

Revised Teaching Activities

This reflective process has allowed me to learn and understand more of 'what the student does' (Biggs, 2007). My investigation focused on whether I was creating an environment that promoted reflection and experiential learning. It may be argued that I do, demonstrated by my students ultimately gaining different perspectives, a component of an effective reflection process. However, it may be argued that based on the initial feedback the class room environment did not support the reflective process by establishing trust, acceptance, appropriate risk taking and mutual respect for others (Knapp, 1992).. The issue now, is not how well I teach, but how well the students learn. I have learnt that my students are initially uncomfortable and confused with the student centered approach to learning.

As a teacher, I have been more concerned with taking a 'rational' and scientific approach to teaching and have not considered the role emotion takes in the learning process. This is consistent with the findings of Boud et.al. (1993, p14) who claim: "*… emotions and feelings are the ones which are most neglected in our society: there is almost a taboo about them intruding into our educational institutions, particularly at higher levels*".

My initial response was to consider strategies so that I could reduce or remove the source of discomfort. However, I am no longer convinced this is the right approach. However, in reflecting back over the semester, I have found that the student's confusion has contributed to greater student attendance, as well as encouraged students to ask questions. Thelen (1960, p. 81) challenges the effects of the '*norms of comfort and accommodation*' that exists in classrooms advocating uncomfortable tasks promote effective learning. Whilst Boud & Miller (1996, p. 10) claim "*emotion and feelings are the key pointers both to possibilities for, and barriers to, learning.*" However, therein lays the problem, the potential of barriers to learning. So the challenge appears to be finding the right balance between presenting the students with chaos on the one hand, and cut-and-dried solutions on the other, where all the interesting conceptual work has been done (Biggs, 2007).

According to Brookfield (1987) tensions will inevitably arise between what teachers ask the students to do and what they would prefer to do. As a result, Brookfield claims it is important that students know why we are committed to certain activities. Next semester, I will explain to my students that my insistence on particular ways of working is grounded in a set of examined and informed beliefs about what teachers should do, what education should look like, and how learning should happen.

I need to make known to the students that sometimes this 'different' approach can make them feel uncomfortable, or confused. The focus of this unit is to recognize and understand the advantages and limitations of our espoused and tacit views on management skills. However, I need to include activities to enable the students to become more overtly aware and examine their approaches to learning. Next semester I plan to have the students form groups, have an issue to investigate, and tell them to begin work – all with minimal instruction. In the frustration and confusion that will inevitably follow, the students will be plunged into a student centered approach. This will form the basis of the ensuring debrief. This approach is consistent with Knapp (1992) who suggests a teacher be aware of student attitudes and if students appear uncomfortable, the teacher should question the students as to how they are feeling. After the activity I will ask the students to reflect on their own process in their groups. I will ask questions like:

- "How did you feel in that activity?"
- "Why did you feel that way?"
- "How do normally prefer to learn?"
- "What should I be doing as a teacher?"

During debriefing, I would like to make explicit the students expectations are of me in the role as their teacher. Further, I would like the students to discover for themselves their perceived role of a student or a learner. These expectations or roles will be considered in terms of the espoused theory and the theory in practice. This l also establishes a basis of the workshop approach for the weeks to come. That is, we bring the whole of our life, aspects of our past, our expectations, and feelings to a learning situation. Basically we do not see a new situation but tend to relate to an experience in terms of our past experiences (Boud et.al., 1996). As a result, learning needs to examine these beliefs and assumptions to ascertain if they still have currency. In subsequent weeks I will ensure that a component of the reflection also addresses their feelings and reactions to the workshop.

I plan reschedule the course content to help with the students transition. This course contains a number of key areas, such as learning, and self awareness which incorporates emotional intelligence the content of which, may be used to help the students through the transition. For example, emotional intelligence draws on the work of Goleman (1996) who classified emotional intelligence into five main domains: knowing ones emotions; managing emotion; motivating oneself; recognizing emotions in others; and handling relationships. Emotional intelligence can help learners take greater control of their feelings and emotions and so progress towards more productive behaviours that they may wish to develop, such as increased calm, the ability to challenge a belief set, or the development of increased sensitivity to self (Wilson & Beard, 2003). I propose that this topic takes place in week three which allow the students an opportunity to experience the workshop process. Going by the feedback received this semester, the students seem to particular struggle around weeks five and six. As a result, this would appear to be the best time to schedule the topic on 'learning' whereby we go through Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. I plan to undertake a reflection addressing four steps (Boud & Walker, 1996) that help to alter or transform barriers to learning, namely: acknowledge that they may exist; name the barriers; examine their origins; and finally identify how we can work with the barriers.

Other forms of scaffolding will need to be incorporated into the unit particularly in the transition period. Specifically, the students appeared to struggle with the concept of reflective writing, their experience to date has involved writing descriptive essays. As a result, I need to spend time discussing, or showing the students, reflective writing. To increase the student's involvement as well as encourage them to undertake revision prior to the class, I will ask them to conduct the theory component of the workshop. In week 13, I will ask the students to give their 'advice' to subsequent students, as well as

identify their reactions to this course. This feedback will be placed on the blackboard site, in the announcement section at the beginning of the next semester. Perhaps, awareness of how others have felt and dealt with the unit will assist new students. Feedback will be collected regularly throughout the semester to assess how students' learning is progressing.

Conclusion

These findings regarding my students experience to the workshop approach have important implications to me as teaching at the university moves towards a student-centered learning environment. It seems that such ways of learning may be new and uncomfortable for some students. However, many students overcame the perceived difficulty of an alternative approach to teaching and learning, and ultimately enjoyed the experience, as well as gained different perspectives on learning as well as management skills. I need to provide appropriate support to help my student's transitions into the new learning environment which will allow them to achieve and develop regardless of feelings of discomfort. I learnt that it is not about how well we teach, but how well the students learn.

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