

“Leisure Live!”

John Safranek, John R. Collins, Jr., and Barbara Wilhite
University of North Texas

Generating enthusiasm for learning about leisure might seem like an easy task, especially in an entry-level college course on the subject. However, with the added complexities of exploring diversity issues and developing environmental awareness, the course becomes a bit more complicated. One solution to such an educational challenge is to turn it around so the students are required to integrate and apply their own unique experiences to solve the problem. This approach to learning is not new, but it does require a belief that students learn best when they are wholly involved in the pursuit of meaningful knowledge. That is, it is the process of acquiring that knowledge which is primary, and not solely the outcome (Crosby, 1995).

“Leisure Live!” Description

“Leisure Live!” is a semester-long, experienced-based group project that is a foundational component of the *Leisure: Human Diversity and the Environment* course curriculum, and culminates in a 50-minute group presentation. Each group of students chooses a specified recreation category (e.g., indoor sports, adventure pursuits, arts, crafts, and hobbies), and is expected to explore how select cultures engage in activities within that recreation category. Presentation formats for “Leisure Live!” differ depending on student interest, experience, and creativity, and have emulated a “game show,” a Saturday Night Live skit, a café, a museum, and a championship hockey game. The concept for ““Leisure Live!”” evolved from a desire to make course activities more experiential, and to keep pace with a trend in higher education to provide more experience-based learning opportunities (National Society for Experiential Education, 1997).

Theoretical Background: “Leisure Live!” Explained

Joplin’s (1995) five-stage model of experiential education exemplifies the experiential components of the “Leisure Live!” project. For learning to be experiential, it must be a process that includes reflection. Joplin’s five-stage model uses an action-reflection cycle that includes the stages: focus, action, support, feedback, and debriefing. To better illustrate its applicability, the Culture Café! example was selected from the “Leisure Live!” presentations.

During the focus stage, perhaps the most critical phase of the model, a task is presented in enough detail to prepare the student for the challenging action that follows. The amount of detail provided the students must not be too great, as this would rule out unplanned learning opportunities (Joplin, 1995). From the student’s perspective, suitable focus tasks for group members include meeting and exploring each other’s interests

and identities; discussing and exploring the personal meaning of the project; reading and sharing information with group members about various activities within the recreation category; and brainstorming to uncover creative presentation themes.

From an instructor's perspective, focus tasks include providing students with the assignment's purpose and goals; allowing adequate and strategic classroom time to build a strong, supportive group; and assisting the group to define criteria for quality presentations. During group formation, the instructor must also model and teach appropriate interpersonal communication and group dynamics skills. When available, segments of previously videotaped "Leisure Live!" presentations are shown to enhance student focus. To provide further focus and motivation, students complete the Leisurescope instrument. This assessment helps students identify a particular recreation category (Schenk, 1998).

The Culture Café! presentation highlighted the hobby of cooking by offering creative meals from different cultures. The group members were the wait staff who took food orders, served, and educated the "customers" (students) in the diverse leisure aspects of the culture whose foods they would sample, and discussed environmental concerns linked to each culturally unique food dish.

In Joplin's model (1995), action arises when students enter into a challenging situation, often accompanied by stress, and are required to assume critical responsibility for applying new knowledge and/or the use of skills to solve a problem. This stage involves the students actually processing the information they are exploring. Student action tasks for Culture Café! emerged when members agreed on a presentation idea from which a cultural theme emerged, decided on the specific flow of the 50-minute presentation, the location for the event, and which group members would be responsible for each identified task or role. After students committed to the café theme, they began to research cooking as a means of both leisure and cultural expression, and identify and research the cultures they wished to incorporate within the café theme. Since the Culture Café group was itself made up of students with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, students elected to interview parents and relatives for ideas on cultural food dishes, and then conduct more targeted library research on the specific foods and both the cultural and environmental significance of growing, preparing, and serving these foods within unique cultural contexts. For the Culture Café group, challenging action reached its zenith during the first few minutes of their "Leisure Live!" presentation, when performance stress may be the greatest for group members.

Support and feedback, the third and fourth stages of the model, took place throughout the students' learning experience within the project, the presentation, and the course. Providing students with adequate in-class time to get to know one another and share diverse views helps to build a climate of security within each group. Ensuring that students view the instructor as a resource tool capable of stimulating insight into problem solving is vitally important. Written feedback provided on group presentation out-

lines in advance of the presentation provides both support and reinforcement. Verbal feedback on the degree of group cohesion and task orientation is equally important in operationalizing the model. Culture Café! members required a great deal of instructor support during the group's focus stage, as the idea for a café was slow to emerge. Once the café concept took hold, students needed instructor feedback on their proposed research methods in order to view themselves and their own ethnic identities as valid lines of inquiry.

During the debriefing stage, learning is translated into being through recognition, articulation, and evaluation (Joplin, 1995). "Leisure Live!" requires such a public disclosure and evaluation of knowledge through class presentations and written evaluations of self, group members, and peers. Many "Leisure Live!" groups provided awards for students who fully participated during their presentations, thus generating unique recognition opportunities. The Culture Café! group's debriefing began as each member became comfortable with his/her role as wait staff, which was about the time each served their first food dish to a "table" of "customers," and the stress level of the presentation began to wane. As time passed, each member became more comfortable in his/her role as both cultural tour guide and server. As the "Leisure Live!" assignment requires that peer/audience members bring two questions about the topic to class on presentation days, "hungry" students began to inquire about the different cultures and the significance of both the unique foods and the environmental issues.

Reflections on Past Experiences

The "Leisure Live!" project has emerged as the pivotal learning experience in this course. In an attempt to implement an activity of this nature, it is helpful to compare the experience to a "learning expedition." This "expedition" is an educational experience that begins with clear goals, may have unexpected turns, and requires the need to change perspectives (Campbell, Liebowitz, Mednick, & Rugen, 1998). Finally, the instructor has to "let go" of the process, and allow the students to develop their ideas on their own terms (Sakofs & Armstrong, 1996). The assignment's success depends heavily on the way the experience is presented to the students and the foundation that is built within each group during the focus phase.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The benefits of an experiential learning activity of this scope are multi-dimensional. The interaction within and between both group members and other "Leisure Live!" groups often serves as a catalyst for both personal confrontation and discussion of respective value systems as they pertain to cultural beliefs, and issues of diversity and environment. Qualitative data from "Leisure Live!" evaluations have illuminated the depth of cultural, leisure, and personal awareness students have gained through the experience. One student reflected on increased respect for differences between human cultures: "From Iran to Native Americans, all cultures have interesting leisure activities,

customs, and basic living patterns. Though these cultures are new and different to me, they must be respected and valued as part of our diverse world." Another student noted, "I believe that leisure transcends society and is a common denominator in bringing societies closer together and increasing diversity." Another comment, "Before this experience I didn't realize how much other people stereotype different cultures. I now notice it more than ever and feel more strongly than ever about how wrong this is," revealed personal growth in understanding and appreciating the deleterious effects of prejudice.

References

- Campbell, M., Liebowitz, M., Mednick, A., & Rugen, L. (1998). *Guide for planning a learning expedition: Expeditionary learning Outward Bound*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Crosby, A. (1995). A critical look: The philosophical foundations of experiential education. In K. Warren, M. Sakofs, & J. Hunt (Eds.), *The theory of experiential education: A collection of articles addressing the historical, philosophical, social, & psychological foundations of experiential education* (pp. 1-13). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Joplin, L. (1995). On defining experiential education. In K. Warren, M. Sakofs, & J. Hunt (Eds.), *The theory of experiential education: A collection of articles addressing the historical, philosophical, social, & psychological foundations of experiential education* (pp. 15-22). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- National Society for Experiential Education Foundations Document Committee. (1997). *Foundations of experiential education*. Alexandria, VA: NSEE.
- Sakofs, M. & Armstrong, G.P. (1996). *Into the classroom: Outward Bound resources for teachers*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Schenk, C.N. (1998). *Instruction manual for Leisurescope plus*. Ravensdale, WA: Idyll Arbor, Inc.