

# **Expanding the Traditional Classroom via Experiential Learning**

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## **Introduction**

Even entry-level recreation practitioners are expected to possess high levels of skill related to leadership and group facilitation. These skills are often the result of the students' understanding of group development theory, knowledge of group leadership and facilitation techniques, the ability to effectively apply these skills, and the ability to self-evaluate and improve. At the University of Southern Mississippi, students enrolled in the Recreation program have historically been taught group development theory and facilitation and leadership skills through traditional means—class instruction on leadership theory and facilitation skills and in-class opportunities to apply what they have learned. Feedback is provided to the students by the instructor in the form of a grade resulting evaluation. The intent of the exercises is to teach students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Our concern has been that this method of teaching may realistically only familiarize students with the skills they will eventually need to lead groups, and which they will later need to refine during internship experiences and on-the-job training.

## **Theoretical Conceptualization**

Over the past few years, a systemic change in pedagogical methods has been introduced to better prepare students to serve as group facilitators. Preparation begins early in the junior year; the time when students declare their major and begin taking core courses. Students are systematically exposed to theories of group dynamics and group change, taught leadership and facilitation techniques, provided opportunities for applying these skills in realistic settings, and taught to evaluate their performance by comparing group activity to theoretical expectations. In essence, the instruction comes full circle. A student's ability to perform, self-evaluate, and continue to improve across their professional careers becomes dependent upon their understanding of theory related to leadership and group facilitation.

To promote this system, faculty have established a learning lab, known as *ACCESSRecreation*, as an externally funded addition to the program with the dual mission of providing recreation services to the community while serving as an oppor-

tunity for students to practice professional skills in a realistic, yet controlled settings. Program agreements are currently in place with the city elementary, middle, and high schools, and the city park and recreation department. In addition to leadership and group facilitation, skills targeted for advanced learning through application have included individual assessment, individual program plan writing, comprehensive and specific program planning, program evaluation, and professional development. The purpose of this paper is to present a systematic method, grounded in experiential education, for teaching leadership and group facilitation skills to students as they progress in their education from learning theory and techniques through applying and self evaluating.

There exists a theoretical basis for employing experiential learning to improve students' ability to apply learned skills in recreation. Johnson and Johnson (2000) recognized the effectiveness of experiential learning and stressed the importance of self evaluation in the learning process. They defined experiential learning as "generating an action theory from your own experiences and then continually modifying it to improve your effectiveness" (p. 53). Kolb (1984) developed a model of experiential learning in an attempt to explain how "experience is translated into concept that can be used to guide the choice of new experiences" (Sugerman, 1985, p. 264). Kolb stresses that effective experiential learning begins with the observation of a concrete experience and, after a period of reflection, the abstract conceptualization of the learner's observations. Individuals then engage in active experimentation based on their conceptualization. According to Kolb, this experimentation leads to concrete experiences. While Kolb was making references to the learning experience of group participants, these same principles can be applied to group leaders.

One of the concerns recognized by educators is the need to balance a student's practical experience with theoretical knowledge (Herremans & Murch, 2003). The authors argue that individuals must have a "broad-based, theoretical education" as well as an education grounded in "technical, experiential skills" (p. 66). They restate the importance of theoretical knowledge and advocate the use of experiential learning to bridge this gap. Teaching students theoretical foundations related to making good decisions and the need for communicating with one another, providing them with the tools to lead, and providing them with opportunities to make those decisions and the ability to evaluate the outcomes may be one method to wed experience and theory. Referring to Lewin's (1944, 1948) action theory, Herremans and Murch suggested that "interlocking the benefits of the professional education model with the action learning model lends itself to the use of experiential learning techniques" (p. 67). At the University of Southern Mississippi we use the vehicle of ACCESSRecreation as a new pedagogical tool to apply these theoretical concepts to teach students leadership and facilitation skills across four domains.

### Learning Activity

First, students are introduced to the theories of leadership and group facilitation. Instructors provide readings and lead discussions on group dynamics, leadership power, the use and resolution of conflict, power struggles, and internal and external influences on group development. Through class discussions students become familiar with concepts like “forming, storming, norming, and performing” (Tuckman, 1965). Mastering these theories will prepare students to understand group dynamics, which in turn will better prepare them to lead groups toward desirable outcomes. In essence, it provides the students with the “why” of what they do as leaders. Yet it will be through practice that students will eventually see this phenomenon occur.

Second, students use classroom time to learn specific leadership techniques. These techniques may include group arrangement, positioning, reducing distraction, attending skills, passive and active listening, nonverbal communication, story telling, attitude therapy, and of course, debriefing. The skills represent the “how” and are the tools the leader will need to move the group toward the desired outcomes. In the classroom, students gain knowledge of a menu of leadership skills and the fundamental understanding of how and when to employ them. While classroom instruction is effective in introducing these skills in order to prepare students to become conversant in their use, leadership skills become functional professional tools through application, repetition, and evaluation.

The third component of learning is the application, or experiential learning stage. Here students are given the opportunity to apply learned skills. Applying learned skills takes students’ understanding of techniques to a higher level as they move from being conversant in facilitation skills to competent in their application. More importantly, though, students begin to experience the power of leadership to achieve outcomes, thus testing the theories learned in class. This stage could be referred to the “if, then” stage as students learn that if the group is at a certain point in development, then some techniques are more effective than others in achieving desired outcomes.

To allow students to embrace and practice the theory and knowledge gained in the classroom, three specific experiential activities are provided. First, students are provided with an opportunity to facilitate their peers during a half-day challenge course program. Students who elect to participate in this activity work with a partner, demonstrate skills via facilitating initiative activities and low ropes course elements, and receive feedback from faculty. The second experiential opportunity provides students the chance to facilitate initiative activities for gifted and talented elementary students. These student facilitators are responsible for developing the program, leading the activities, and providing educational processing. The final experiential activity is an inclusive initiative activities program for middle school students which mirrors the program for elementary students. All three of these experiential learning

activities provide our students with opportunity to practice techniques learned in the classroom; however, the learning experience does not end here.

The final component of this unique approach, evaluation and self-evaluation, will allow novice leaders to continue to grow long after they graduate. As the key component that is intertwined among the other three, evaluation skills allow students leaders to critically examine the effectiveness of their leadership by comparing desired results to actual outcomes, assessing their leadership performance, and reevaluating the effectiveness of their problem solving efforts. During the aforementioned experiences, students work in pairs and alternate as primary leaders, providing opportunity to lead, assist, and immediately reflect on their recent experience. In some instances, the “alternate leader” is immediately provided with feedback from a faculty member while the second leader takes charge of the group. This allows students opportunity to process their performance and return to a leadership position two or three times in one day. In some cases, students in the junior class serve as assistants to the senior leaders. This experience not only allows the juniors to experience leadership through observation as a first step, but also allows them to evaluate less than perfect leadership.

### **Recommendations**

On the basis of our experiences with these particular classroom learning activities, we would offer four recommendations. First, because Recreation is such a practical, hands-on degree, experiential learning is vital to students’ professional success. Simply teaching in the traditional classroom is no longer sufficient preparation for today’s Recreation student. Because of the importance of experiential learning in Recreation, it might prove beneficial to expand the concept of the “classroom” and provide unique, experiential learning activities to reinforce concepts and theories presented in the classroom. This second recommendation may take the form of additional projects or courses, but should offer students opportunity to put classroom concepts into practice. Thirdly, we would recommend that partnerships be developed with organizations and agencies outside of the institution. We have been served well with our connection to the local public school district and city and these partnerships have enhanced the educational experience of our students. Finally, we would recommend a formal mentoring process exist in conjunction with these experiential learning activities.

Based on comments from students enrolled in the Recreation program and comments made from teachers and students who serve as participants in these experiential activities, expansion of the traditional classroom has enhanced the educational experience of our students. This new pedagogical approach to teaching leadership and facilitation skills appears to be having a positive impact on students in our program and we would recommend other institutions consider experiential learning as an alternative to traditional classroom experiences.

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