

An Experiential Approach to Understanding Physical Disability

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Introduction

Increasing academic knowledge of theoretical concepts related to leisure and physical disabilities is an important part of most leisure studies' and therapeutic recreation curricula. Developing experiences that apply the theoretical concepts in creative and experiential ways foster increased understanding that might not otherwise take place. Physical disability simulation exercises, as one example, provide students with an opportunity to acquire insight into using a wheelchair as one's main means of mobility. While it is not possible for students to gain a complete understanding of what it is like to permanently utilize a wheelchair for mobility, the partial insights and increased awareness make this exercise a valuable teaching tool.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight experiential learning via an in-class disability simulation experience as a means to enhance students' understanding of leisure and disability. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to explore the theoretical foundations of experiential learning within a therapeutic recreation and physical disability course. It is also intended to highlight the value of this pedagogical approach to learning by combining experience and theoretical knowledge.

Barrier to Participation: Learning Through Experience

Everyone experiences barriers to leisure. Individuals with disabilities, however, often have to overcome barriers that the general populace does not, making access to and participation in leisure more difficult. This course develops understanding about various barriers that people with disability may face. Intrinsic as well as environmental barriers can often inhibit leisure participation for people with disabilities. Areas of particular pertinence to this exercise are environmental barriers to recreation participation (Kennedy, Austin, & Smith, 1987) including attitudes towards people with disabilities (Dattilo, 1994). Certain environmental barriers such as architectural (build-

ing access), geographical and environmental (natural barriers such as steep hills, grassed areas, or weather) and social barriers such as attitudes towards people with disabilities can all have a detrimental effect on leisure involvement of people with disabilities (Kennedy, et al., 1987). Attitudes continue to be the largest barrier for people with disabilities (Dattilo, 1994; Environics., 2004). The literature advocates that disability simulation exercises are an effective means of de-stigmatizing individuals with disabilities and decreasing the construction of negative attitudes towards them (Dattilo, 1994). Cowell, Thompson and Berke's research (2001) found that disability simulation decreased negative attitudes towards students with disability in a music class setting. By experiencing a simulation people develop an increased awareness that hinders the development of prejudicial beliefs about the capabilities of others.

The following discusses how applying an experiential learning process to a wheelchair simulation exercise facilitates student's acquisition of knowledge in these areas and fosters awareness, understanding, and development of positive attitudes as well as social advocacy development.

Learning Outcomes for the Simulation Experience

The simulation had a number of learning outcomes that lay the foundation for an experiential learning process to take place. The learning outcomes are outlined as follows.

1. Students will gain an experiential understanding of Environmental Barriers.
2. Students will experientially explore their personal attitudes and social attitudes towards physical disability (How do I feel using a wheelchair? How Do others respond to me?)
3. Students will understand how they can apply this experience to the real world, currently as well as in the future. To understand how they can apply this experience to the field of recreation and leisure.

The Simulation Disability Experience

From past work as a TR practitioner I am aware that local hospitals often have surplus wheelchairs that are not currently being used by clients. A number of hospitals within the community were approached about using surplus chairs for the purpose of a student simulation exercise. In addition to acquiring equipment to facilitate a student experience, this is also helps to foster university/community relationships and partnerships in education. My experience in the two different communities I conducted this exercise in has been that the hospitals are more than happy to assist in this manner.

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Course material dealing with barriers, attitudes towards people with disabilities has been covered in class prior to the simulation. As a refresher, a brief summary of the key concepts is done just prior to proceeding with the simulation. Students are placed in groups for the purpose of this exercise. The goal is to have as high student to chair ratio so that the groups are manageable and time will allow for each student to have the opportunity utilize the chair for as long as possible. On average it has worked out to approximately six students per group. Students are requested to apply the theoretical concepts of the course to what they are about to experience during the simulation.

The campus is broken down into different geographical areas where each group is asked to go explore. The areas include the typical spaces that students would access as a regular part of student life on most university campuses. The areas include the library, the bookstore, the gymnasium/arena/swimming pool, the cafeteria, and a classroom area. Students are requested to take turns being the individual using the wheelchair. Each group is asked to assess a number of aspects of their experience based on guidelines provided. Students are also asked to reflect on how they are feeling and how they experience the public response and attitude towards them as a wheelchair user. They are also asked to assess any ecological barriers (natural barriers) or architectural barriers they may experience. The latter included the entrance to the building and the interior including accessibility of drinking fountains, table/desks, washroom facilities, doorway sizing, handle fixtures and any other architectural inhibitors or facilitators they might find (a more detailed listing below describes the guidelines for assessment that the students are given). Each group has a rotating recorder to document the experiences and observation the group has made with the intended purpose of using them during a reflective de-briefing of the simulation at the end of class.

Research has shown that ethical issues and implications need to be address when using simulations of disabilities as a teaching tool (Behler, 1993). Today's university campuses are composed of a diverse student population, including increased numbers of students with physical disabilities. To be effective, simulations on university campuses must be conducted in an appropriate respectful manner. Guidelines help facilitate this. Before leaving to their assigned area of campus students are given the guidelines and reminded that while the simulation is a fun way to learn, they must also conduct themselves in a professional and respectful manner. This is an ethical point of concern and an important component for the success of the simulation and the acquisition of learning. The simulation guidelines also act as a mechanism to promote a directed experience focused on understanding and awareness.

Guidelines:

TABLE 1

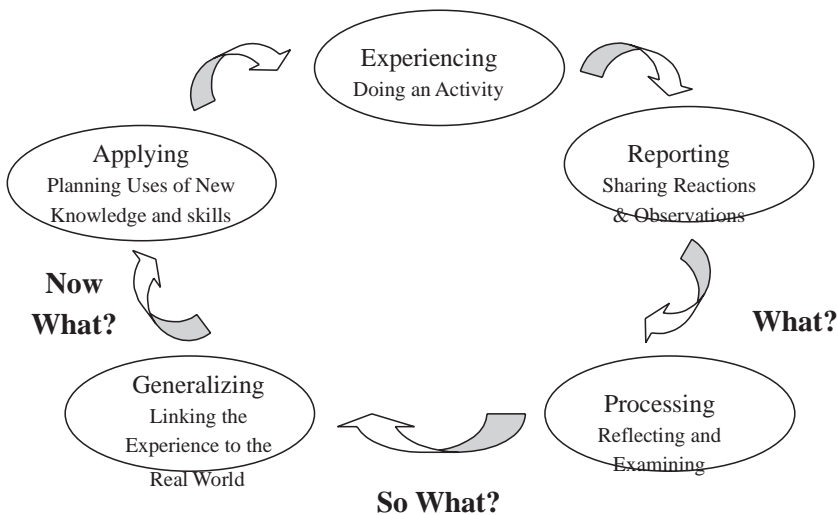
Simulation Guidelines:

<p>A. Personal Feeling and Social Response to you in the chair How are you feeling when you use the wheelchair? What emotions did you experience when trying manoeuvre the chair? How did this affect your sense of self and independence? Do you feel you were treated in the same manner as you are in your everyday life? What do you perceive other people attitudes towards you? Does anyone offer unsolicited assistance? Do people appear annoyed or upset at the speed you are moving?</p> <p>B. Ecological Factors Where there any ecological factors that effect your experience? Weather conditions, hills, natural barriers?</p> <p>C. Architectural Access: : Is their usable wheelchair parking available? Is there a wheelchair ramp into the building? How usable is the ramp? Are the door ways wide enough? Are the interior doorway frames flush with the floor or is their a change in level when going through the doorway? What is the door lever design, lever, push bar, or standard round handle?</p>	<p><i>If there is an elevator in your area, is it large enough to manoeuvre a wheelchair? Are the elevator controls easy for the wheelchair user to access? Can you drink from the water fountains when seated in the wheelchair? Are the public telephones accessible from the wheelchair?</i></p> <p><i>If there is an interior wheelchair ramp does the grade meet the current code standards discussed in class? Is there a railing beside the ramp? If so, is the railing at an appropriate height? Are the handles on the doors lever type as oppose to push bar or traditional round handled?</i></p> <p><i>Washroom:s</i> Are the washrooms large enough to manoeuvre a chair in? Are their pull bars for people to utilize in transferring onto the toilet? If yes are they located in a usable place? Can the wheelchair fit under the sink basin so the individual can independently use it? Are the taps on the sink lever controls or knobs?</p> <p><i>Service Areas:</i> Is the person using the wheelchair able to view the person serving them? Make a transaction? Reach merchandise, books, and supplies?</p>
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Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is founded on the “art of doing” something with the intended outcome of learning. While teaching requires the presentation of information, data, and facts, learning requires absorption of that information beyond simple memorization for the purpose of testing. As a process, the goal is to provide information (teaching) in such a way that student’s have the opportunity to also experience (learn) the material. Inherent in this, is providing an experience that shifts education from a purely cognitive (thinking) level into a deeper more personal level (an emotionally connective level).

Experiential learning can best be explained as a learning model that begins with an experience followed by reflection, discussion, analysis and evaluation of the experience. Hunt (1991) describes experiential educators as promoting learning through participation, reflection, and application to situations of consequence. Designing experiential learning therefore consists of two foundational components, providing an experience, and facilitating the learner’s reflection on that experience (Joplin, 1981). The major premise of experiential learning is that individuals will best learn through assessing an experience. As part of this they will develop insights, make discoveries and increase understandings through meaning-building. It is the “action-reflection” cycle that sets this form of learning apart from simply providing an educational experience within course content. That is, a course might include a disability simulation experience as part of the course content, without an opportunity for learners to reflect however, it is not considered experiential learning. The learning cycle implicit in the experiential learning process is represented in the following model developed by Henry (1989).



The facets included in the above learning cycle played an integral part in developing the wheelchair simulation used in this course. As indicated in the learning outcomes, the simulation was design to facilitate students to understand what they have experienced, to answer the so what by processing the experience and developing meaning, and answering the now what by thinking how they can apply the experience to their lives and careers.

Experiential Learning Process Applied To the Simulation Experience

A substantial amount of the class time is required for the students to debrief and reflect upon what this experience means to them. As has been highlighted, this component is essential for the transference of learning to occur. It is here where the simulation is transformed from experience into learning. As implied by the learning cycle illustrated earlier it is here where the students take a guided journey and time to reflect on the what, so what, and now what part of experiential learning. The format is very informal with the class meandering through various themes and sharing different ways of understanding the experience. It is a free flowing group-directed discussion that is facilitated by the course instructor as a co-creator of knowledge. The following learning outcomes help the instructors to ensure that the process, while free flowing and non-linear, does cover necessary components of the learning cycle.

This stage of the process is a very exciting part of the process for both instructor and students. The class is typically bursting with enthusiasm to share the insights that they have gained from the experience. Without prompt students are able to connect the theoretical knowledge from class with the lived experience of the simulations. Inevitably the class also wants to take their new found knowledge and advocate for enhancing access within the university community by writing or speaking with administrators about their experience. In relation to this students not only learn about social activism but also the fine art of diplomacy as a means to effect change. Another unexpected outcome of this exercise has been an opportunity for the class to have input into a feature article on campus accessibility in the student university newspaper. In this case a journalist observed one group doing the simulation and requested that the class provide input into an upcoming article.

Conclusion

Experiential learning is a powerful tool to use in academic setting. Much of what we teach in the leisure studies and therapeutic recreation curriculum is positioned well to effectively utilize this particular educational approach. The fact that positive attitude development towards individuals with disabilities is enhanced through simulation experiences makes combining an experiential approach to this an ideal matching. The wheelchair simulation exercise is one example of how students acquire a more complete understanding of conceptual material through tangible experience and reflective processing. The application of an experiential learning to leisure

study curriculum is endless. It is an exceptional learning approach that creates emotional connects to the course content, making it come alive for students. While setting up this type of learning experience requires advanced planning and increased efforts comparative to traditional learning formats, the benefits are well worth the supplemental energies. Developing innovative experiences can be very enriching for both students and teachers, bringing to life what might otherwise be a one-dimensional mode of learning.

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