Howling Wolves: Active Experiential Learning in Event Management

Erick T. Byrd
Assistant Professor
Department of Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality Management
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
PO Box 26170
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170
United States of America

Phone: (336) 334-3041 • E-mail: etbyrd@uncg.edu

Abstract

Active learning is described as educational exercises that involve students completing an activity and then reflecting on that activity. This type of learning is ideal for many recreation, parks, and tourism classes because of its hands-on nature. The purpose of this paper is to describe an event management course that is designed around an active learning activity. The activity is the planning, development and implementation of a class event. The event, Wolf Awareness Day, was treated as a semester long project with students achieving specific benchmarks during the semester. This paper describes the process for conducting this learning activity, followed by a discussion of how to modify the activity for other events.

KEYWORDS: Active learning, experiential learning, event management, reflection

Introduction

Disciplines like recreation, parks, and tourism face the constant pressure of teaching students the theories and concepts of the discipline as well as developing necessary practical skills. This concept is often referred to as the balancing act of theory and practice (Ruhaneu, 2005). Instructors in these fields are very aware of an often-quoted Confucius saying, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" (Brainy Quote, n.d.). This sage advice emphasizes the need for active learning. Simply defined, active learning is an instructional method that involves students participating in an activity (i.e., discovering, processing, and applying information) and reflecting about what they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Conley, 2008; McKinney, n.d.; Wolfe, 2006). Research has shown that students learn and retain more when they are actively engaged in learning (e.g., Hawkins & Weiss, 2004; McKinney, n.d.). Active learning can take on many forms in the academic setting from simple games to experiential learning. Ruhaneu (2005) indicated that active (experiential) learning is a method that can link "academic knowledge and practical skills" (p. 34). Hawkins and Weiss (2004) stated that, "Experiential learning stresses practical application of knowledge to real-world situations, which helps to develop the students' problem-solving skills" (p 3).

Characteristics of experiential learning include: student involvement, emphasis on developing practical skills with less emphasis on regurgitating information, and higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) (McKinney, n.d.). Recently, to facilitate its use, Wesselink (2008) developed a series of criteria to identify if an activity is appropriate for experiential learning, such as focusing the activity on course objectives and creating a community within the classroom and beyond (see Table 1).

Active learning has been documented to stimulate curiosity, increase self-confidence, develop critical thinking skills, solve complex problems, promote new experience, develop or enhance their ability to deal with uncertainty, and retention of information (Hawkins & Weiss, 2004; Ruhaneu, 2005; Wolfe, 2006).

This paper describes an event management course that was designed around an experiential learning activity, namely a class event. The class was a junior/senior-level event management course taught in a recreation and parks program. The event, in this case Wolf Awareness Day, was introduced to the class and then treated as a semester long project with students achieving specific benchmarks during the semester.

TABLE 1

Criteria for Experiential Learning Activities (adapted from Wesselink 2008)

Activity focuses on the course objectives.
Activity creates a community within the classroom and beyond.
Activity allows students share what they have learned with their peers.
Activity allows students make the connection between theory and practice.

Description of Learning Activity

Set-up

Development of the class event activity was a multi-stage process that continued throughout the semester. The process began with briefing the students on the class and the event assignment, was followed by representatives from the zoo visiting the class, development of a concept proposal, committee assignments, pre-event preparation, the actual event, post-event evaluation, and finally a debriefing session and a reflective paper. On the first day of class the students were informed that they were to develop, plan, implement, evaluate, and reflect on an event (i.e., Wolf Awareness Week at the North Carolina Zoo). Students were notified that this event was a semester-long assignment. Course objectives were clearly explained and linked to the assignment so that students could understand the purpose of the event. McKinney (n.d.) indicated that this is a necessary step in the process to lessen resistance by students who prefer traditional style classes (i.e., lecture). The event project provided opportunities for lectures about theories and concepts as a practical application and a common experience to the students. Using the event as an example and allowing the students to share what they were doing in relation to the topic discussed, enhanced their ability to link theory to practice.

Early in the semester the agency representatives, North Carolina Zoological Park, visited the class and explained to the class the agency's goals, objective, and thoughts about the event. Using this information, students subsequently worked as a class to develop a mission statement for the event as well as the major goals and objectives for the event. Based on this discussion each individual student then developed a concept proposal.

The concept proposal was a written document that indicated or proposed the idea that the student had for the event. This proposal was based on the agency's goals and objectives as well as additional goals and objectives identified by the class for different stakeholder groups. In addition, the proposal included:

- A brief description of the event

- The main inputs (resources) that the event would need.

- The main outcomes (impacts) of the event.

- The main target population for the event.

The instructor then disseminated the proposals via the internet and a formal presentation to the class. The students discussed and evaluated each concept to narrow down the multiple ideas presented. Decisions related to the final event elements were based on the mission and goals. As a class the students decided on a final concept proposal that was submitted to the clients, NC Zoo.

Based on the final concept proposal developed by the class and each individual student's interests, the instructor divided the class into committees. The committee assignments were developed using the function-based committee structure explained in their text book, *Event Management and Event Tourism* by Getz (1997). Table 2 provides a list of the committees that were specific to the event and

TABLE 2

Wolf Awareness Day at the NC Zoo Committees and Responsibilities

Committee	Responsibilities
Finance	Responsible for the budget, sponsorships and partnerships, and spending
Human Resources	Responsible for the staffing the event
Marketing	Responsible for the design, development, and distribution of promotional material
Program	Responsible for programming of the event
Design	Responsible for the theme, color, layout, décor, props, and lighting
Operations	Responsible for the general operations and logistics of the event
Research	Responsible for evaluating the event.
Risk and Security	Responsible for all security-related issues for the event
Education	Responsible for educating the event staff about wolves.

specific responsibilities of each, including the Design Committee, Educational Committee, and Program Committee. The committee assignments should be completed after the event concept has been developed due to the likelihood that students would change their interest areas based on the final concept.

The entire class worked together in committees and individually to develop, plan, manage, and evaluate the event. During the remaining time prior to the event, each committee worked on their assignments and responsibilities, reported to the class once a week, and obtained final approval on any major items (i.e., color scheme, marketing plan, and final budget).

On the day of the event, the students were completely in charge and performed their assigned tasks. The instructor took the role of an active observer. If difficulties arose, the instructor allowed the students the opportunity to overcome the challenge (i.e., making modifications due to rain). If for some reason the challenge was dangerous or inappropriate for a student to deal with, the instructor stepped in and handled the situation. The instructor should provide consistent positive encouragement and support to the students. However, it is essential for the instructor not to be viewed as a "crutch" for the students. Throughout the entire experience, students developed a strong ownership in their learning, because they played an active role in developing the experience.

Debriefing

One of the most important elements to active learning is debriefing the experience after the event. For this class the students were given two opportunities to debrief, as a group and individually. Soon after the event, the instructor allowed the entire class to reflect on the event openly as a group. It is important that the instructor moderate and encourage students to share their thoughts and feelings about the event and their learning experience. The instructor should guide the conversation without biasing the students' responses. After the group debriefing,

each individual student was asked to reflect on the event in the form of a written paper, thus allowing for reflection on their individual learning experience.

Expected Outcomes

There were multiple outcomes for this activity, which included: 1) understanding the multiple perspectives involved in event and meeting planning; 2) developing outcome-oriented goals and objectives for individuals and groups; 3) organizing and conducting special events and meetings; 4) creating and implementing marketing techniques and strategies of special events and meetings; and, 5) analyzing programs, services, and resources in relationship to participation requirements. Each assignment component was developed to address one or more of these outcomes. To achieve the first two objectives, "understanding the multiple perspectives involved in event and meeting planning" and "developing outcome-oriented goals and objectives for individuals and groups," the instructor presented the information in class. To provide the students the opportunity to practice and demonstrate mastery of this outcome, they developed goals and objectives that addressed the different stakeholders for the event (i.e., NC Zoo, local residents, visitors, schools, etc.). This outcome was reinforced during the debriefing with a discussion about if and how these objectives were achieved.

The third outcome, "organizing and conducting special events and meetings," was incorporated throughout the in-class lectures as well as the planning and implementation of the event. Through developing, planning, implementing, evaluating, and reflecting on the event the students were able to achieve this outcome. Students were able to demonstrate outcome four, "creating and implementing marketing techniques and strategies of special events and meetings," through the development and approval of marketing strategies and materials for the event and each program element. Also, through the debriefing and reflecting session students were able to discuss how the marketing could be improved and possible outcomes of different marketing strategies.

The fifth outcome, "analyzing programs, services, and resources in relationship to participation requirements," was demonstrated by the students during the discussion of the event concept and proposal. When the students considered any proposed event element (i.e. face painting, gift booklets, information tables, etc.), they had to decide who would participate, how they would participate, whether there were any constraints to participation, and how to reduce or eliminate those constraints. Based on the answers to these questions, some event elements had to be modified or eliminated.

Evaluation

Evaluating the students' performance for this project was accomplished in three ways; as a class, as a committee, and as an individual. The class grade was based on the overall event. The main element of the class grade included meeting the established mission, goals, and objectives for the event. The second manner by which students were evaluated was as a committee. Each committee had specific assignments and duties in relation to the event (see Table 2). The achievement

and quality of these assignments and duties comprised one part of the committee grade. The second part of the committee grade was based on peer assessment. Peer assessment was important based on the idea that everyone in the class was in part responsible for the learning environment.

The final project evaluation method was as an individual. Each student was graded by the instructor on their participation prior to the event, during the event, and post-event using a specifically designed rubric. All students in each committee conducted a peer assessment of every other committee member. The class grade, committee grade, and individual grade were combined together to produce the students' final project grade.

Considerations and Variations

There are many factors to consider before implementing an event or any other experiential activity in a class. First, as interesting and fun as active learning appears, it is not right for every instructor or every class. For this activity to work, students need to be mature and comfortable with independent learning. Also, the instructor must be willing to relinquish some control of the class. It is important for instructors to understand that their role is a facilitator. Most importantly, this is also a very time consuming activity. Not only does the activity encompass the entire semester, it also requires constant monitoring. If a course has substantial content that is difficult to finish in a semester, this type of activity would not be appropriate. It is crucial for instructors to allow the students to make mistakes and correct those errors. Students should be allowed to succeed and fail.

When working with an organization or agency, it is important that communication between the agency representative(s) and the instructor is clear and constant. Events can vary; thus, there is a need to modify the committees based on the event. However, the committees that are developed for the event must be linked to the learning objectives, the tasks and roles of the students must be clearly defined, and the students must be provided with as much information as possible from the start.

Working with a community partner to develop and implement an event fits well with the concept of community engagement. Through community engagement, additional benefits for the university, the student, and the organization can be achieved. One of the main benefits for the university is the development of partnerships/relationships with community organizations. Other benefits include public awareness and the potential for additional collaborative work. Student benefits could potentially include internship or employment opportunities, as well as opportunities to conduct additional projects with the community partner. The community partner also reaps benefits including greater awareness of the university and their own organization, the ability to share university resources, and the opportunity to gain a wealth of creative ideas.

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