Engaging Experiential Learning Activities

Ideally experiential learning happens “at work” and is simply part of useful, effective, added-value work, where people don’t just do what they do, but keep their eyes open for what happens, try to understand that and adapt their course of action to improve the outcomes. That growing “awareness” for improvement opportunities simply by ‘processing’ experience or the insight that changes in the environment demand for a different approach, is nothing else but : LEARNING.

But in real work situations you cannot ‘direct’ what happens and in the heat of the moment, significant observations are not always addressed... the game must go on and workload or urgencies are often in the way of thorough processing of experience and experimenting new approaches.

In “off-work” circumstances, workshops but also team meetings for instance, you can create the context to process experiences at work and if there is no immediate ‘common experience’ as the offset of an experiential learning process, you can ‘introduce’ those (near to real) experiences through a number of learning activities.

In the Experiential Learning wheel, we give an overview of several methodologies you can use at different stages of the experiential learning process. In the remainder of this text we describe in some more detail a number of methodologies you can use to bring experience into the formal off-work situation.

The methods in red are described in this text. For most of the other methodologies you’ll find job-aids in the “Impact Through Involvement” Toolkit on the Move! website (www.movelearning.com).
**Case Study**

**Description:**
- Information (often a written file) is given to the participants, describing a specific situation or problem.
- This situation can be real or hypothetical and the case can be taken from literature (a lot of cases have been published) or custom made for a specific learning situation. The more ‘recognizable’ it is, the better the learning effect and transfer to real work situations.
- In most cases, participants are asked to take the standpoint of a manager or consultant and to study the case in order to:
  - Identify the problems
  - Analyze the problems
  - Propose solutions
  - Select solutions
  - Implement it
- Individual reading and preparation can be done as pre-work
- Discussion and sharing about the case and agreeing on a ‘course of action’ is mostly done in small groups.

**Instructional use and limitations**
- creates a problem solving situation similar to that many trainees may face after returning to work
- it allows for individual and group work
- It can be used as the start of an inductive learning process or as an application exercise
- it creates opportunities for ‘learning with and from each other’
- It allows participants to bring in their own situations in comparison to the case (the instructional design needs to invite them to do it !!!)
- It stays rather cerebral, since participants do not have to put their conclusion into action
- It stays somewhat ‘theoretical’ because there is not a real ‘need’ to come up with an answer (it is history and not in my back yard). This is less so if the case is a real life situation for one or more participants.
- The process is more important than the “right” solution (it’s about analysis, fact based decision making, sharing information, …)
- It’s ‘teacher driven’ if the case is selected or designed by the teacher. It is also possible to use the ‘real life experiences’ of participants as case material. In that case a participant prepares the case and might also ‘comment’ on the suggestions of the different groups of participants. (in that case it comes close to an incident method).
### Incident Method

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<th><strong>Description:</strong></th>
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<td>→ The incident method, works with a ‘real case’ ideally experienced by the facilitator (or a witness who is invited in).</td>
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<td>→ The “history of events” is broken into slices of information that end with an ‘incident’ (a moment in which a decision has to be made / something has to be done). In that way you create two or three ‘rounds’. Each round has a scenario with the following steps:</td>
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<td>1. <strong>Input:</strong> Information (often orally) is given to groups of participants, which puts them in front of a decision to be made. They are put in a specific ‘role’ they have to act from. (This is the situation, you are the manager, what would you do?)</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Reflection &amp; Analysis:</strong> Then the group start to ‘analyze’ and tries to reconstruct the incident by listing questions and identify additional information they need, as they would have done also in real live before taking a decision or stands</td>
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<td>3. <strong>Question &amp; Answers:</strong> Then the facilitator (or witness) answers these questions based on what was known in reality at the time this decision had to be taken (not with hindsight). You can choose to do this process per subgroup (groups have then only the info that was given to their own answers), or do it in plenum and then all groups hear all questions and answers.</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Decision making in groups:</strong> The groups will, based on the info they got, examine the different options and decide for a certain course of action. They can use a methodology like FFA for instance if they have been introduced to such methods. At the end of this sequence the groups needs to agree on the next step : “In this case, at this moment, with the info we have, our next action step(s) would be ...”</td>
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<td>5. <strong>Comparison with real live:</strong> Then the ‘witness’ juxtaposes what happened in ‘real live’ to the different group solutions, explaining the reasoning behind it and comparing the arguments with those used by the groups. The new situation, that was created by what was done in real live, is then the starting point for the next round</td>
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<td>→ The participants are put in a specific ‘actor role’ in each round: “you are the manager who has to decide, what will you DO”.</td>
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<td>→ A the end a ‘debrief’ can be done to identify the learnings from this case.</td>
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### Instructional use and limitations

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<td>→ Having a witness in the room makes it ‘real’ (and is necessary to bring in all the elements that lead to the ‘real’ action steps and to discuss the proposed actions of participants)</td>
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<td>→ It’s less cerebral because you really have to ‘DO’ (atleast say what you will do) and you have some idea of the impact of your actions (since you will have feedback from what people did in reality and how that played out)</td>
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<td>→ It can be combined with role play (simulation), if you create after step 4 in each round, an extra step, where somebody ‘enacts’ the decision. The counterpart can in that case be played by the witness.</td>
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<td>→ Involvement can even be strengthened if you create a ‘discussion round’ after round four where groups have to ‘defend’ their decisions and explain the arguments in discussion with other groups who took another decision (For instance with a ‘fishbowl’ discussion technique)</td>
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<td>→ It involves, because in the different rounds ‘tension’ is build up and unexpected events happen (it’ not all on the table at once as it is in case studies for example)</td>
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Role Play

**Description:**
- You describe a ‘realistic situation’ and context to the participants.
- You divide the group in small groups (same number of participants as you have role-players in your situation)
- Each participant takes on a ‘different role’ and will during the role-play enact that role in interaction with other roles (participants).
- Each player has a ‘role card’ that introduces the specific role, and contains information that he only can have, (earlier experiences, feelings, personal issues, etc...). These cards could also indicate a particular ‘goal’ this player wants to get out of the activity.
- The role description can be very detailed but you can also leave a lot of ‘liberty’ and ask the role-player to use his own feeling, imagination, etc... to fill in the role.
- The players get time to read through the material and prepare their position and attitude
- During the actual ‘role play’ people ‘enact’ their role and ‘interact with each other’ as if the situation was real. (so people don’t talk about what they would do if they were a salesperson ... // but they act as ‘salesperson’)
- The role play is not interrupted.
- The role-play can be videotaped or / and be observed by life observers. Make sure that this doesn’t interact with the role-play (ask observers not to react, laugh, intervene, talk to each other in any way)
- You can give observers specific assignments or a model / guideline questions in order to ‘focus’ their observations. (can be based on models like Belbin or Bales)
- Debrief (with /without video) to give feedback to the players but also to highlight team dynamics, or how different team roles are taken up etc... (see Debriefing job-aid in this text)

**Instructional use and limitations**
- The objective is to get in the shoes of “others” to understand better their points of view and why they do things or how they would feel in such situation (empathy)
- The objective can also be to ‘test / try out’ in a safe environment something the participants will be doing in real life soon (to get feedback from that, experience how they react in certain situation, try it again and improve the way they do things). In that case it becomes in fact a simulation.
- It is particularly useful in ‘communicative / relational practices’ such as negotiation, sales, interview, discussion, problem solving, ... and emotional situations such as : firing, exit interview, give difficult feedback, dealing with anger, ...
- It is a way to ‘confront’ people with ‘situations’ they did not yet encountered in real life but could occur which helps to prepare for that kind of situations
- It’s active, interactive and creative and often gives a lot of energy...
- It is an ‘artificial situation’ and so it acquires some capacity to ‘enact’ and to ‘become’ the role you play
- The artificial character provides sometimes a ‘reason’ for people not to think about what they just have done : “In real live I don’t do it like that...” (it point to resistance and denial)
ROLE-PLAY STRENGTHS

- Helps make abstract problems more concrete
- Facilitates learning across many areas of curriculum content
- Involves manipulating knowledge in exciting ways
- Demonstrates a practical integration of knowledge, skills and abilities
- Involves applying knowledge to solving problems
- Involves direct, experiential learning
- Develops sympathetic understandings
- Provides immediate feedback
- Involves comparing and contrasting positions taken on an issue
- Promotes lifelong learning
- Facilitates expression of attitudes and feelings
- Provides opportunities to speculate on uncertainties

Role Play
## Simulation

**Description :**

- It can be in the ‘format’ of a role-play, or a game, but typically for a simulation is that it “mimics” as well as possible the real situation. It SIMULATES reality.

- This makes it useful in situations where:
  - *People need to ‘test out’ how they will deal with situations in real live they did not encounter yet*
  - *People need to be ’confronted’ with effects of their behavior*
  - *People need to realize what the different elements and difficulties will be once confronted with those situations*

### Instructional use and limitations

- It is a working model for reality and comes close to ‘on-the-job-learning’, with the advantage that the risks, stress, etc... of real work is eliminated.

- The advantage is that it is very recognizable and that the reactions of people in simulated context will be very near to how they would react in real life. (easy to transfer, creates energy, the usefulness is obvious for participants, ...)

- It creates an opportunity to confront participants with situations that are too dangerous, expensive, scarce, time consuming or overwhelming.

- The disadvantage is that the nearer it comes to reality, the more complex it gets for participants. So if participants still need to master specific aspects of a situation it might be better to ‘build’ first “simplified situations” and go gradually up to ‘real life situations’.

- It could be a good way to “introduce” the situation and the complexity to participants. Then the objective is not yet for the players to ‘build new skills’ to deal with the situation, but to become aware of the difficulties... which they will than analyze and attack gradually. In that case the complexity is an ‘instructional advantage’.

- It is very ‘experiential’ in the sense that it is a ‘full experience’. They actually do it (not just talk about it).
Experiential Game

**Description:**

- It is a ‘game situation’ that has no ‘content links’ with the real work situation
- It functions as a ‘metaphor’ for real life. Which means that the situation is not ‘work related’ but the setup is such that behaviors will occur that happen also in real life.
- Games can be ‘intellectual and rational’ (value-based games, dice games, statement game, etc...) or very active games and activities where ‘problems’ really need to be addressed and where people do something (ex: Spider Game, broken squares, rope games, challenges, ...). Only the last ones are experiential games, the others are instructional game formats but based on reflection, discussion, etc... and less on ‘having a real experience’.
- The game is only an alibi, it is the debrief and the translation to “what does that mean for our situation at work” that is really important.

**Instructional use and limitations**

- It is very active, funny and often creates a lot of energy
- By being not “work related” it avoids that people use their usual ‘defense mechanisms’ they use at work. They just get in there and then... what happens happens. If it is very work related they will start to think, often they will focus on content instead of process, ...
- It is a good tool to create awareness for what people do (and what they do not realize in real work)
- It can also be used to ‘introduce’ an issue without having to explain why that is important for this group (because after the game the issue is open on the table). For instance the importance of “internal customer – supplier chain” becomes evident after the broken square game.
- It can be used in bigger groups (as a whole or split up in subgroups)
- The same game, can often be used to focus on different things, depending on how it is framed (you can focus on communication, collaboration, roles, energy and motivation... providing that you offer the right frame)
- Making a game (that provokes the behavior and reactions you need to learn from) is often time consuming and needs testing. (especially the framing and the instructions are key to trigger the expected behaviors)
Debriefing Activities

These guidelines give a possible structure for debriefing experiential learning activities (role-plays, games, simulations, …). For each of the steps the tool also provides you with a few possible debrief questions.

These guidelines can be used to prepare the debrief during the instructional design phase and are the start for customizing the debrief questions, that need to be adapted in function of:

- The specific learning objectives you want to focus on (most activities can be debriefed in different ways to highlight different learnings)
- The type of experiential activity (simulation, experiential game, incident method …)
- The group and experience of the participants during the activity

Why do we debrief

The answer is relatively simple: people don’t learn from the experiential activity as such, they learn from the ‘reflection’ on their experience. The main objectives of a debrief are:

- Help participants ‘see’ what happened during their experience
- Help them understand why things happened that way and how that influenced the outcome of the exercise
- Get feedback from others and understand feelings and reactions of the other participants
- Help them formalize their awareness and insight (can be structured through a model or theory brought in by the facilitator)
- Help them recognize similar ‘processes’ in their real working environment
- Help them construct ‘alternative routes’ for action in similar situations or conditions

Giving people the opportunity to speak out, to share feelings, etc. is key for a good debrief, on the other hand it is important to facilitate the debrief, make sure people listen to each other, and move on from merely ‘telling what happened’ or as is often the case ‘start to do the exercise again’

General setup

You can organize the debrief in different settings and in a combination of those:

- Individual reflection (with the help of an observation and reflection form)
- Reflection in duo’s (with the help of an observation and reflection form)
- Per ‘team’ or ‘role’ in the experiential game. Ex: the manager debrief / the workers debrief
- With input of dedicated observers (if they were present during the game)
- With the whole group

Recommendations

- Start with an individual reflection before starting with the team debrief, it allows people to unwind, structure their feelings,… before they start with the plenary debrief
- Try to maintain a balance between structure and flow. Prepare a number of questions but encourage spontaneous comments from participants
- Formulate, based on the learning objective of the exercise a few key messages as ‘round up’ for the debrief.
### Six phases of debriefing and example questions

*People don't learn from experience; they learn from reflecting on their experience.*

#### Ventilate feelings

This phase gives the participants an opportunity to get strong feelings and emotion off their chest. It makes it easier for them to be more objective during the later phases.

- How do you feel about the outcome?
- How did you feel during the exercise?
- Did you feel ‘engaged’, enthused, involved during the exercise? why or why not?
- ...

#### Assemble facts and observations

In this phase, collect data about what happened during the activity. Encourage the participants to compare and contrast their recollections and to draw general conclusions during the next phase. (if you have recordings, you can use the video material as ‘feedback’ and confront them with what ‘really happened’)

Begin this phase with a general question, and then zoom in on specific things that happened during the activity.

- What happened?
- Who took which role?
- When that first task failed, what happened then?
- How did you react on that?
- Was at that stage, the objective clear for you?
- Why did you refuse to do that?
- ...

#### Learnings

In this phase, encourage the participants to generate and test different hypotheses. Ask the participants to come up with principles based on the activity and discuss them.

Begin this phase by presenting a principle and asking the participants for data that support or reject it. Then invite the participants to offer other principles based on their experiences.

- What is the consequence for the activity, if one person says ‘he knows how to do it’ and starts doing it?
- What do we learn from that?
- What does that tell you about the importance of feedback?
- ...

#### How does that relate to the real work situation?

In this phase, discuss the relevance of the activity to the participants’ real-world experiences.

Begin with a broad question about the relationship between the experiential learning activity and events in the workplace. Suggest that the activity is a metaphor and ask participants to offer real-world analogies.

- You see similar things happen at work?
- Can you share with us a real work experience where similar ‘mechanisms’ occurred?
- How does that impact on your performance?
- How do you deal with that in real life?
- How do people react if you do that at work?
- ...

#### What could you do differently?

In this phase, encourage the participants to apply their insights to new contexts. Use alternative scenarios to speculate on how people’s behaviors would change.

Begin this phase with a change scenario and ask the participants to speculate on how it would have affected the process and the outcomes of the activity. Then invite the participants to offer their own scenarios and discuss them.

- What could you do differently?
- How would that impact your performance?
- Based on what you learned, how would you deal with that upcoming challenge?
- What prevents you of doing it?
- What would make it possible for you to try that out?
- ...

#### What’s next?

In this phase, ask the participants to undertake action planning. Ask them to apply their insights from the experiential activity to the real world.

Begin this phase by asking the participants to suggest strategies for use in future rounds of the activity. Then ask the participants how they will change their real-world behavior as a result of the insights gained from the activity.

- What did you learn from this experience?
- What do you want to achieve now, in your real world?
- What are you going to do?
- When would you be satisfied?
- How could you create the ‘right conditions’ to succeed in this?
- What do you expect your team mates (here in the room) to do to support you?
- ...