Experiential learning and the development of professional skills

For Staff Development in Teaching and Learning.

Part One

‘Just Four Steps?’

Professional Skills Development Using Experiential Learning

Can you Deal with Customer Complaints?

Underlying principles

Working with our own personal experiences enables us to explore how common social interactions can lead us to develop propositional knowing from experiences (experiential knowing).

Higher education is concerned with ‘higher’ forms of knowing, and the Bloom Taxonomy of learning presents a hierarchical relationship between experiential knowing and propositional knowing. Propositional knowing appears to have higher status, and as such tension is created between learners and teachers when students want to experience the
linkages of ‘real’ and ‘relevant’ lectures and seminars (experiential and practical knowing). Students want to hear about the connection to these other forms of knowing.

Teaching staff often deliver lectures and seminars that have a strong focus on critical and theoretical (or propositional) knowledge: so how do we resolve this tension?

A hierarchical modelling of the relationship between forms of knowing might not be the best way portrayal. What is needed is recognition of the continual oscillation between ways of knowing and doing in the world?

Understanding the oscillation between forms of knowing – a simple Example:

With regard to professional skills development I am going to select and work with the topic of

Dealing with difficult situations or dealing with difficult customers.

From the experiences of the learners I am hoping to create propositional knowing to help learners to be aware of and remember the common stages involved in these professional skills (in this case portrayed as four or five main stages). These stages can act as road maps to help learners initially navigate through to the resolution stages.

Similar common stages are found in the essential steps to assertiveness, or negotiating or in giving and receiving feedback or in personal relationship issues.

This experiential session will also use spatial awareness and bodily kinaesthetic imprinting.

The floor or a large desk space is used for the creation of a four or five step modelling of the general stages of dealing with difficult customer issues, created out of ‘real’ personal experiential stories. Using kinaesthetic reinforcement the steps are also walked along, and simultaneously talked through, to embed the learning. The body is part of the remembering; it remembers the steps in a sequence in the space.

This session uses real stories/scenarios, real artefacts (the fight menu etc) to engage learners and ensure the propositional knowing and modelling comes ‘alive’.
Figure 1: Trainers in AIG Corporate Learning Centre in Taiwan teaching financial modelling using spatial awareness techniques.

Courtesy Training Department, Nan Shan Life Insurance, Taiwan.

How to run it

Longer version: The participants are asked to relate 'experiences' of poor and good customer service. These can be typically restaurants, hotels, supermarkets, check in desks etc. These can then be explored for common ground and as answers to the question ‘What are the essential ingredients of 'good' and 'poor' customer service?

Participants are then asked if they are willing to share any event relating to a particularly difficult experience, either as a customer or when dealing with a difficult customer experience as a member of staff of an organisation.

The experiential ground is then discussed and explored in terms of identifying any common stages or sequences.

The session can also use written correspondence to look at customer complaints and dealing with complaints. These can include personal letters of complaint and replies brought in by participants, such as lost items or returns, or poor quality goods or services.

The session is then linked to the experiential session below:

Short version: An event, relating to a real customer complaint on an aeroplane, is briefly explained to participants.
Figure 2: The In-Flight Complaint!

The Business Class Flight Service:

The Business Class flight from Manchester to Mumbai cost £1,800.

When food was being served the trolley arrived with me last of all. I looked through the rather glamorous menu, a brochure in fact detailing the experience of their chef, and at the back a whole page was devoted to the whine taster. On asking for my selected choice I was told there wasn’t any of that option left. The only option left was fish for the starter. So and decided not to make a fuss I decided to have fish.

When the trolley arrived for the main course, the stewards followed the same route and arrived again at my seat as the last business-class customers to be served.

I asked for my preferred choice was told there wasn’t any left. The only option left was fish. On saying that I had fish for the starter, although it wasn’t my preferred choice, the staff simply repeated that the only choice available was the fish. In that case I said I don’t really want a main course of fish.

The staff could see that I wasn’t happy with this business-class experience. I think it might be fair to say I had ‘unhappy customer’ written across my forehead! I declined the sweet course.

Eventually the chief steward came to my seat and crouched down beside me and said ‘I understand that you’re not a happy with the service Mr Beard’.

Under these circumstances what would the stewardess say and do?

Now the group are asked to deal with this situation by working through what each party might say and how the situation might end.

*This is available as a film clip of a training session in the Regency Hyatt in Mumbai, or voice file for use in learning and development.
Figure 3: adding to the sense of reality?

*Please note that this real customer service issue was resolved very professionally by the chief stewardess working for Lufthansa.

The participants are asked in the brief above to discuss what their **response** would be if they were to be handling the situation as professional staff working for the organisation concerned. The similarities and differences between group responses are then discussed.

Six masking tape squares are created on the floor (see photo above) to represent a possible sequential common journey (in time) of the customer service recovery responses. Each group is given a set of large cards to write common sequences or steps that they can identify and to then place these cards in the appropriate masking tape square.

This learning experience might help learners deal with both verbal and written complaints. If the participant cards are different then this is fine.

I compare their responses with mine below, and we discuss what professional skills we might be able to take from the session.
**Verbal complaints.**

The four possible sequence squares might represent the following:

1. First deal with and/or acknowledge the **emotional** response – at the very **least** acknowledge any anger or upset caused. Show that you have listened and show the person that you have heard and understood.
2. Try to establish the **facts** behind the upset.
3. Move towards possible **solutions**.
4. **Closure** – some acknowledgement of a satisfactory or dissatisfactory outcome?

Here we can see **four key words** to help professional practice development. These can be developed into a much deeper level of understanding once basic skills are developed. The modelling is like a London Underground map – it is a simplistic representation of the real thing, to allow people to get from A to B, without getting lost!

Each step of the complaint situation can take some time before the moving on to the next stage. The four or five stage sequence can be observed in complaint interaction behaviour, but sometimes complainant interactions get stuck: they might be aided by moving through these steps to a satisfactory conclusion.

This **walk the talk** exercise acts as a visual, auditory and scenario reinforcement of the steps and how they might occur in real life.

Learners are then asked to repeat the steps for dealing with complaints.

**Dealing with written complaints.**

A folder of real letters is presented to the groups.

These are real letters of giving and receiving complaints. The numerous letters include asking to be let off a parking fine and the response, companies giving vouchers in compensation for poor service, letters that clearly do doing nothing except half heartedly apologise, a threatening letter from a solicitor saying you hadn’t paid their bill yet, and suggesting they will take you to court and that your credit rating will be permanently affected, and so forth.

The groups are asked to look at the letters and judge them. They are also asked to examine the common format for effective complaining format and the most effective format for the response format.
Resources required

Large cards for writing key words on.
Masking tape.
Letters of complaints and responses.
Additional Notes:

Professional Development & Assertiveness.

Assertiveness became part of many counselling courses in the United Kingdom during the early 1970s [for example counselling courses at Keele University in Staffordshire]. Firstly in the US and then the UK, within a new climate of freedom and equality it was recognised that people who previously have limited chances in life, now had an opportunity to lead a very different way of life. What was missing however was the skill and ability of everyday working folk to speak up and take advantage of new rights without damaging the rights of other people.

This awareness of the rights of the people and the sense of personal responsibility was the central goal of assertiveness, as was being confident, to say what it is that people wanted, to be honest with themselves and with other people.

Thomas Harris encapsulated the behavioural theories of transactional analysis when he created a simple mobile called the OK Corral which sums up our feelings about ourselves and other people.

It is said that there are a number of simple steps to assertiveness. These steps can be practiced, and honed so that they eventually become part of everyday life skills and professional practice. These skills can help with customer service issues, with negotiating and can support productive personal relationships. Over time these skills can be further developed to include feelings assertion, saying ‘no’ and other assertiveness techniques.

The three essential steps are as follows:
Step one: actively listen to what is being said and then show you the person that you both hear and understand them (other views).

Step two: say what you think or what you feel (your views).

Step three: say what you want to happen....(change or solution centred language).

An excellent source of information for further development of these skills is ASSERTIVENESS AT WORK written by Ken and Kate Black, and published by McGraw-Hill. Another excellent on well-known source of information is the book I’M OK YOU’RE OK by Thomas Harris and published by Pan Books.

Part Two

Mixing forms of knowing – a more complex example:

‘Walk the talk’

Teaching Complex Subjects using spatial-relational mind & body awareness.
**Underlying principles**

A *kinaesthetic* approach to learning which embeds potentially complex information more deeply in the memory through a *spatial-relational* awareness.

Learners map and walk the learning whilst talking aloud.

Here the concept of *‘Let the Learners do the Work’* applies to both the learning activity design and the learning activity experience/delivery.

The notion of a *learning ‘journey’* underpins this learning activity. The technique explained in detail here uses the learning of a complex history of the largest social movements in the world, namely that of the *environmental movement*. It is illustrative only and many adaptations can be applied to this technique (see Tips section).

**Spatial mapping occurs in several dimensions: forward, backward, left, right and vertical upwards (higher) analysis.**

This will involve and understanding of the connections between the laws, the voluntary and statutory organisations and the special designated sites that are themselves created by laws.

The activity uses floor or table space in a creative way, generating multi-dimensional *time lines*.

This technique also uses learner collaboration and research. Colour coding enhances the sensory reception (coloured cards = themes), and the work is supported by a complex electronic database generated by many learners over several years. This is in itself a useful principle to adopt in the notion of letting the learners do the work as here course materials are continuously created and added to each year by the learners themselves.

A form of testing/assessment can be added using the *viva* principle if needed.

**How to run it**

This activity uses learning space to teach complex material. The start point for this specific illustrative activity is a brief analysis of the historical database (a free 350 year database of environmental facts and figures) This brief analysis is completed in groups who are assigned
themes (laws/voluntary sector organisations /land designations/government organisations). The database is explored for trends. Questioning is the basis of the group research: When were most voluntary organisations formed? What kind or type of organisations are they? How have they changed over the years? This starts the journey of analysis. Other groups will explore the laws, the QUANGOS, the designations etc.

Each week learners might be asked to contribute to the development of materials. This might be 10% of the marks for a Voluntary Organisation Factsheet. One is handed in but the number copied and returned to learners might be 30 or 40 depending on the size of the group. The Factsheets can be stapled and put together as a booklet. Several booklets can be built up. They act as reference documents for further analysis. In addition lectures and seminars can be given on any of these themes over the weeks.

In the final analysis stage students are asked to use all their resources developed to create a spatial relational map using the whole set of coloured cards with one end of the room representing the year 1600, and the other end of the room representing the present day. Additional blank cards can be given out to fill in.

The journey focus will vary in each group but a talk will be given by each research team. The composite talk of their walk will include everyone and it will explore the complex spatial relational nature of events in the history of environmentalism. Each walking journey will be recorded and marks allocated at a later date. by digitally recording the walk the talk by individuals who have been allocated themes to research. The digital recordings can be given to the learners to edit using free software such as Audacity available free on the web. Walking and talking and sharing in this way the experience can reduce the stress that is found in many other forms of assessment: learning and assessment appear to the learner to seamlessly merge into each other.

The picture-map layout on the floor or table demonstrates their knowledge of the subject and when finished students walk the talk presenting the historical picture as they proceed. This kinaesthetically reinforces the learning and tests understanding in a visual-oral way.

Participants become architects of their own learning space. The teaching and training can have a triple output = teaching the subject, teaching about learning processes (how to organise information or literature – chronologically or spatially) and teaching assessment.

Outline of possible instructions for learners:
The following represents just one idea for using the database.

1. Split into small groups.
2. Each group must take on exploration of **one theme** selected from a total of five research themes: laws, voluntary organisations, designations, key events, government organisations.
3. Using a highlighter, select all the most interesting and relevant **facts** within your theme using the database material.
4. Develop a brief analysis and commentary on the **trends** that you have observed.
5. Having developed some expertise in your theme, now work collaboratively with other groups to lay out all your cards on the floor or on a large boardroom style table. Using one end as a date of 1600 and the other as today, map out the history of environmentalism.
6. Blank cards can be used to add to the timeline.
7. When you are ready take the tutor through the history by all walking the talk together.
8. Write up brief notes for the development of an assignment.

**Resources required**

- Empty video box (All the essential kit and instructions for learners can for example be presented in this plastic video case).
- Instructions and front sheet design to be inserted into the video box sleeve.
- Coloured laminated cards with key information on with dates.
- Database booklet (see web resources)

The five themes are:

1. Voluntary organisations
2. Designated sites
3. Major laws
4. Government QUANGOS.
5. Major events in history

The colour coding is as follows:

1. **Yellow** - for NGOs,
2. **Green** - for designated sites
3. **Blue** for laws - such as the National Parks Act,
4. **Grey** - for QUANGOS
5. **Orange** - for key events in history
Figure 4: showing the different sized and coloured coded cards, the video box and the electronic database printed out as hard copy for learner analysis.

**Coloured card examples:**

Coloured cards, with key information on, might include any of the material from the database, such as:

**Blue**

1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act  
1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act  
1968 Countryside Act  
1995 Environment Act  
Etc.

**Yellow**

Conservation Corps/BTCV - 1959  
Greenpeace – 1971  
Groundwork – 1981  
Friends of the Earth – 1970  
Earthfirst! – 1988  
RSPB – 1891  
National Trust – 1895  
Ramblers Association – 1935  
World Wide Fund For Nature – 1961  
Etc.

**Green**

National Parks  
Areas of outstanding Natural Beauty – first designated in 1957
Local Nature Reserves – first in Scotland in 1951
Country Parks – first established in 1969
Marine Nature Reserves – first in 1986
Etc……more to be added……

**Grey**
Countryside Agency
Natural England
Countryside Council for Wales
Environment Agency
Etc.

**Orange**
World Wars
Mass Trespass

**T i p s**

**Further development ideas:** other coloured cards can be designed for major outbreaks of illnesses and diseases e.g. Black Death, Smog, Foot and Mouth, Bird Flu.

Laminated pictures of **key texts** such as Silent Spring (Rachel Carson), Small is Beautiful (Michael Shumacher) and Blueprint for Survival.

**Other applications:**

This technique can be used for any historical event which has a spatial and or temporal relationship, e.g. the history of computers, the history of mobile phones, the history of philosophy, corporate company history, complex sequential financial work such as a invoicing and claims system where the routes are complex and not easily remembered or understood.
Figure 5: A simulation of complex procedures.