


2012

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Kurka, Valerie J., "Recognizing Culture in Experiential Education: An Analysis and Framework for Practitioners" (2012). *Master's Capstone Projects*. 20.

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Recognizing Culture in Experiential Education:

An Analysis and Framework for Practitioners

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Abstract

Experiential education is an intentional educational process that relies on experiential learning theory. This paper categorizes common features of experiential education and analyzes them with a cultural framework. Common features of experiential education include individual development, student-centered teaching, individual challenge and learning, challenge-by-choice, “emotional safety”, and reflection/processing activities. The features of experiential education that I have analyzed have basic cultural assumptions of high individuality, low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, high achievement, emphasis on internal control, and possible interaction with ascriptive dispositions and masculine characteristics. These assumptions may have implications for practitioners practicing cross-culturally. In an increasingly global world and with the increasing popularity of experiential education all over the world, I suggest that practitioners should equip themselves with tools to work with a variety of participants and the awareness of biases and values in practices in order to continually accommodate diverse populations in a socially-just manner.

Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.

- Confucius, 450 B.C.

Introduction

I consider myself a student of experiential education. I “discovered” the formal field about two years ago when I began my Master’s degree. Experiential education was something that I immediately connected with intellectually. I believed in its tenets, values, and goals without even knowing it. My most vivid learning that I can remember comes from my past experiences and not necessarily from a formal classroom. When I learned of the existence of “experiential education” as a field, a practice, and a philosophy, I grew very curious about it and wanted to learn all I could about it. These past two years have given me that opportunity. As a Master’s of Education student in International Education, living and traveling abroad, and being surrounded by remarkable individuals from a variety of countries, I have had an “international perspective” while learning about experiential education. This is a perspective that questions my own biases as I see validation in other ways of doing and valuing things in the world.

Experiential education is something that I wish to pursue and integrate in my practices wherever I go. I also hope to stay connected to and involved with an international community and “worldly” views. From what I have learned about experiential education so far, though, a few things troubled me. Many aspects of experiential education are rooted in western, Eurocentric values and practices which have been acknowledged by other authors in the literature and discussed later in this paper. I recognize that I am deeply influenced by my environment and education. As a privileged white woman from the United States, many of these values and practices resonate with me.

A significant strength of experiential education is its ability for a learning process to be student-centered and to allow space for individual student experience, interpretation, and learning. Lindsay and Ewert (1999) assert that knowledge gained through an experiential education setting does not hold a single view that is right or true. However, as I began to read more about the theory, philosophy, and practices, I began to question its relevancy for learners who may not share the same values as the theory, philosophy, and practices that experiential education is rooted in. Should I adjust my practice of experiential education with people who may not value the assumptions of experiential education? How does experiential education change when the context with which it takes place changes, if at all? These are questions that I began to ask myself as I started to learn more about the field, and these questions are the motivation for this project.

Since I value the tenets of the theory, philosophy, and practices of experiential education, why should I adjust them or question them? Wouldn't I want to disseminate these values since I believe them to be "good"? John Dewey (1938/1997) cautions that "any theory and set of practices is dogmatic which is not based upon critical examination of its own underlying principles" (p. 22). Warren (1998) recognizes Dewey's similar caution by writing that "methods of facilitation that lack theoretical validation are empty attempts to practice without a sound grounding. The trap is particularly pertinent in cultural diversity work as facilitators attempt to "do the right thing" without an understanding of their own biases or the current anti-bias work theories" (p. 397-398). Warren (1998) also believes that facilitators should become more conscious of how their methods can advance or impeded social justice. Without examining assumptions and biases, practitioners run the risk of framing everything around a perspective of a "we" when others may not be in the picture. (Bell, 1993, p.. 173).

One way to approach these challenges is for facilitators to learn about the “social and cultural backgrounds of their participants and the way their locations in privilege or marginality affect how they teach and facilitate.” (Warren, 1998, p. 397-398). Karen Fox also believes that “addressing nuances enables us to [...] reflect critically on our history including how power relationships, gender, race, ability, culture, and ethics shape our understanding, scholarship, and practice” (Fox p. 44). According to the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) website, a principle of experiential education is that “educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the learner” (“What is Experiential Education”, 2012). This project will attempt to do just that.

My interactions with experiential educators affirm this point; they are constantly learning and reflecting on their own values and assumptions. It is one of many aspects that attract me to the field. As a novice experiential educator myself, it helps me to see where my biases and beliefs lie so that I can be a more effective and socially-just educator. My hope also is that other experiential educators may find this framework useful for examining assumptions and beliefs so that all programs may become or remain effective and socially-just. This paper also serves as a precursor for me for a short workshop that I will facilitate where experiential educators will (1) be introduced to a model/framework for culture (2) understand cultural dimensions relevant to experiential education (3) give examples of how the cultural dimensions might play a role in their own experiential education practices; and (4) create strategies for working through cultural differences they might experience in their practice.

In the following sections, I first differentiate between experiential learning and experiential education and broadly describe experiential education as a field. I then discuss what is meant by “culture” and describe cultural dimensions relevant for experiential education. Next,

I identify and analyze common features of experiential education in the cultural framework.

Lastly, I discuss implications for practitioners and propose steps forward. My purpose is not to focus on difference nor is it to perpetuate stereotypes of various cultures. My purpose is rather to attempt to reflect on biases and assumptions in common experiential education practices so I and other educators may be aware of them when we work in various cultural contexts.

Methodology

For this paper, I conducted an informal content analysis of over 35 articles and 10 books referencing the theory and practice of experiential education including articles from the areas of therapeutic outdoor education, service-learning, wilderness-based adventure travel, challenge courses, experience-based training, and generic articles about experiential learning theory. I categorized common and popular features, practices, and characteristics of experiential education that I have personally experienced to which a cultural dimension framework could be applied.

The research questions that I used to guide my analysis are:

- What are some common features of experiential education?
- What are the cultural assumptions of common experiential education features?
- How might certain experiential education practices be in different cultural contexts
- How should experiential educators adjust their practices in response to cultural context, if at all?

What?

Experiential Learning and Experiential Education

Experiential learning and experiential education are often used interchangeably. However, there is a distinct difference between them. Experiential education is best understood as a philosophy of education (Itin, 1999, p. 135) that utilizes experiential learning theory. I will now describe experiential learning and experiential education in more detail.

Experiential learning

In very simple terms, experiential learning is learning from experience. There are a number of approaches to experiential learning theory including a constructivist approach, a situated approach, a psycho-analytic approach, and a critical approach (Merriam, 2007). The most common approach in the literature is a constructivist approach (Merriam, 2007) and it is the approach that I am most familiar with. Therefore, for this paper, I focus on the constructivist approach to experiential education.

Stehno (1986) reviewed seven models of experiential learning. He found that all models suggest that experiential learning involves (1) action that creates an experience; (2) reflection on the action and experience; (3) abstractions drawn from the reflection; and (4) application of the abstraction to a new experience or action. The following diagrams outline the processes just described in Figure 1:

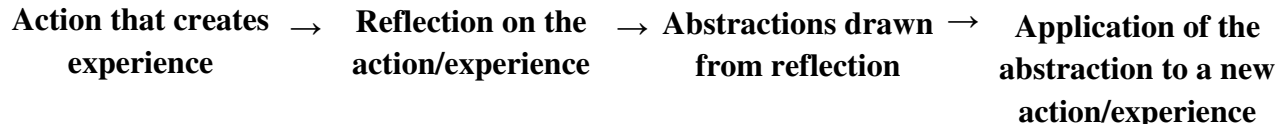


Figure 1: Basic tenets of experiential learning (Stehno, 1986)

Experiential learning focuses on the experience of the individual (Itin, 1999) that is then reflected upon critically for learning to occur. Further, an experiential learning process can be conducted almost anywhere and with any type of activity or learning medium. Common to these models is the idea that experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience through reflection.

Experiential Education

Experiential education is an intentional process that relies on experiential learning theory. Experiential education can include, but is not limited to wilderness-based adventure travel, challenge courses, job-training, internships, apprenticeships, early education programs, large and small group training sessions, service-learning, therapeutic recreation. This paper will mostly draw on experiential education theory based in wilderness and service-learning contexts, but the ideas will be applicable to practitioners in any experiential education environment.

The philosophical roots of experiential education are credited to a number of historical figures (Johann Friedrich Herbart, William James, Colonel Francis Parker, Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner) related to the progressive education movement which was concerned with “the place and meaning of subject-matter and of organization within experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 7). Specifically, three strong voices in the field of experiential education that stand out are John Dewey, Kurt Hahn, and Paulo Freire. There are some common characteristics between all three which have been adopted by experiential education. They are all concerned with:

1. increasing the capabilities (self-efficacy) of individuals to participate in the democratic process (political awareness and action);
2. concern for understanding the subject matter within experience (EL) which can really be seen as developing a critical understanding;
3. a purposeful process that involves the teacher actively engaging the student in experience; and
4. reducing the power relationship between students and the teacher.

(Itin, 1999, p. 139)

A number of authors have contributed to definitions of experiential education; thus there is no single, universally agreed-upon definition. Experiential education, according to the Association for Experiential Education, is “a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (“What is Experiential Education”, 2012). According to Steve Simpson (2011), two conditions that help make an experience educationally meaningful are (1) predetermined goals and (2) facilitated reflection (p. 11). Reflection is a significant component in experiential learning; it is thus a significant aspect of experiential education. In experiential education, educators (may also be in roles such as therapist, facilitator, teacher, trainer, practitioner, counselor, etc.) intentionally provide guided reflection for learners. Simpson goes on to say that experiential education requires a “carefully formulated plan to continually guide experience in useful predetermined directions” (p. 13). Itin (1999) also comments that “any definition of EE must include or make clear the transactive component between teacher and learner which is absent from the definition of experiential learning” (p.136). For this paper, I

recognize the definition from AEE, but also acknowledge the validity of other contributors to my understanding of experiential education.

AEE has articulated some common characteristics of experiential education which address some of these processes. According to their website, principles of experiential education practice are that:

- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others and learner to the world at large.
- The educator and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because the outcomes of experience cannot totally be predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured for learners and educators to explore and examine their own values.
- The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.

- The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the learner.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes.

(“What is Experiential Education”, 2012).

Rebecca Carver (1996) proposed a framework for experiential education practitioners for program design. She articulated that experiential education promotes the development of student agency, belonging, and competence by utilizing four pedagogical principles of experiential education:

1. Authenticity
2. Active Learning
3. Drawing on student experience
4. Providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity (p. 152).

Authenticity refers to how the activities and consequences are understood by the participants as relevant to their lives. *Active learning* refers to moments/periods of time when students are physically and/or mentally engaged in the active process. *Drawing on student experience* means that students are guided by building on experiences that they have already had. *Providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity* is facilitating students to develop habits, knowledge, and skills to participate in future activities or in roles in their communities.

Essentially, experiential education is an intentional facilitation of learning from experience and applying that knowledge to future experience. The model of experiential education adapted from Borton (1970) asks the questions, “What?, So what? Now what?” (Figure 2).

What?

So What?

Now What?

Figure 2: 3-stage model of experiential education (Borton, 1970)

This is a simplistic way to structure an experiential education event where learners work with some concrete information or experience (“What”), connect its relevance to a current situation (“So what”), and then apply that learning into action (“Now what”).

To complement these ideas, Joplin (1981) presents a five-stage model of experiential education which is a popular model in experiential education literature. This model is intended for facilitators to use as a tool to intentionally create courses with an experiential design. The model is organized around a central hurricane-like cycle (Figure 3) which represents challenging action. Challenging action is preceded by focus and followed by debrief. These three stages are embedded in an environment of feedback and support, which are the 4th and 5th stages of the cycle. The completion of the fifth stage is concurrent with the commencement of the next cycle. This cycle can occur on different levels, often concurrently within a program.

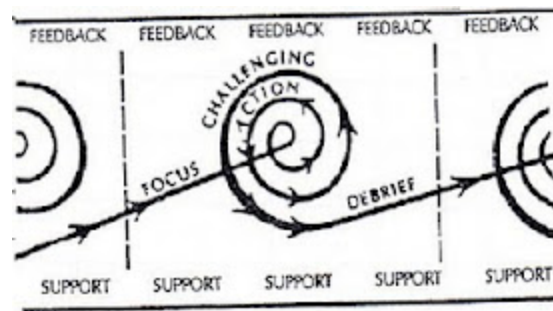


Figure 3: Joplin’s (1981) model for experiential education

A model for experiential education programs

Figure 4 represents a model (adapted from Carver, 1996; Breunig, 2005; Warren, 1988; Vella, 2008) that can describe the structure of most experiential education programs. Each box is located within the one bigger than it. The learner's *learning outcomes* are dependent on the learner "*experience*" which is dependent on the *practices* (pedagogy-strategies/style of instruction) of the educator(s) which are influenced by nature of the content to be covered and the learning styles of the students. Practices are influenced by program *goals* which include learning objectives. The goals of the program are influenced by the *values* inherent in the environment that the program is located in.

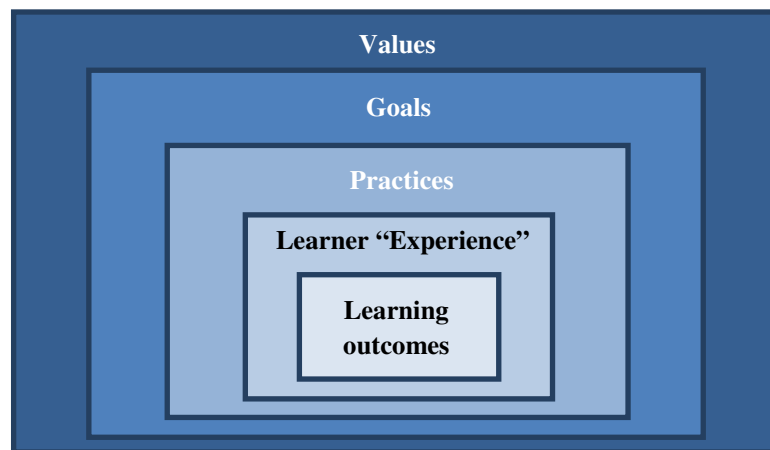


Figure 4: Experiential Education Program Structure (adapted from Carver, 1996; Breunig, 2005; Warren, 1988; Vella, 2008)

For example, in a service-learning course, the learning outcomes of a student might be a basic understanding of the Puerto Rican immigrant migration in Western Massachusetts. The participant "*experience*" might include weekly tutoring sessions with Puerto Rican immigrants. The practices of the service-learning program might include weekly reflection sessions of various activities. The goals of the program could be for students to learn about some roots of poverty in a particular city in Western Massachusetts. The values might include a number of

things like a student-centered approach, knowledge dissemination about causes of poverty, and social change. The specific examples in the above-mentioned illustration are variable, but the point is that according to this model, values shape all aspects of an experiential education program.

One critique of experiential learning theory is that it does not take the learner's context into consideration. However, I found that an important condition of the models of both experiential learning and experiential education is that a learner's interpretation of an experience is influenced by the context of the experience. As Dewey (1923) states, "the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 13). In short, experience does not happen in isolation of context, but is influenced by things such as socio-cultural factors which can shape one's perception of the experience and therefore on learning outcomes. According to AEE, an "educator's primary role includes setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process" ("What is experiential education?", 2012). The "experience" that a learner has is partially dependent on the programming and the educator. In fact, Itin (1999) asserts that the content being taught is as important as the process by which it is taught and the context in which it is taught (p. 141). Therefore, this suggests that educators working in a multicultural environment should be aware of the values that influence their goals and practices in order to create more inclusive and responsive educational environments.

One way facilitators can do this is by examining where values originate. Values are products of a cultural environment. Because of this, all experiential education programming is situated within a cultural environment (Figure 5).

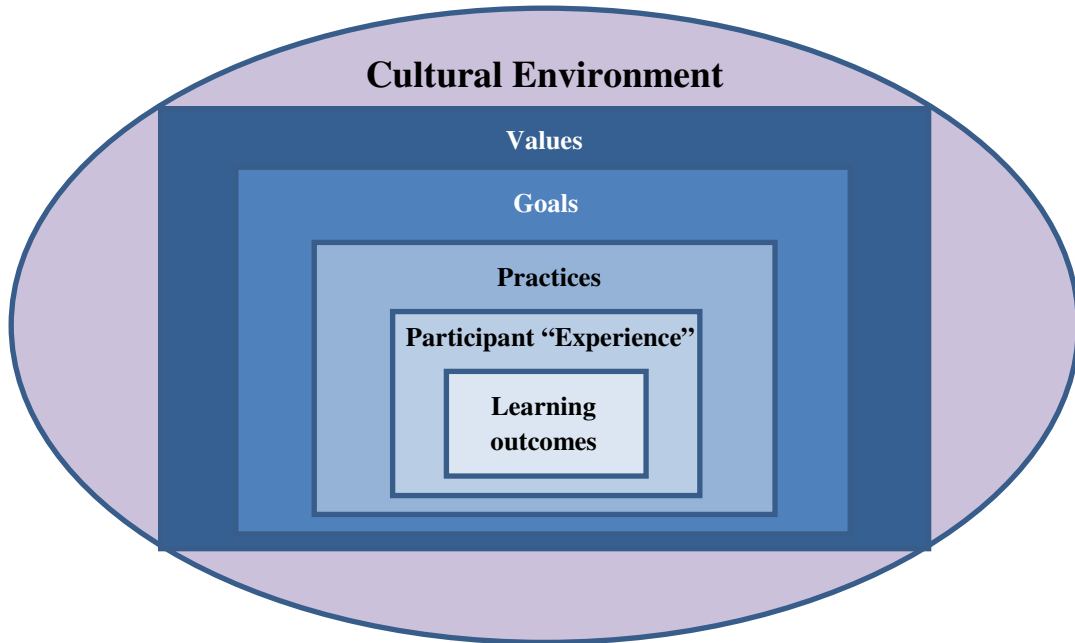


Figure 5: Experiential Education Program Structure embedded in a cultural environment

Therefore, it might be helpful for experiential educators to critically examine what their own-and others’ cultural environment means. To do this, I next introduce a cultural framework as a way to think about culture.

Culture

Culture has a number of definitions depending on the field of study. For the purpose of this paper, I use a simplistic and practical framework for thinking about culture. Edward Schein (2010) defines culture as a “pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough

to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems”(p. 18). Figure 6 can be used as a way to think about culture in this way.

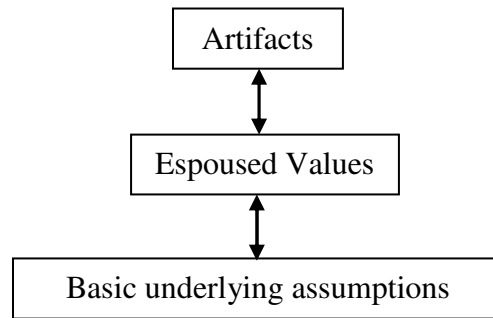


Figure 6: Three levels of culture (Schein, 2010)

According to Schein (2010), culture is composed of three basic levels. The first level is the level of artifacts. Artifacts are observable and easy-to-decipher aspects of culture. Examples of artifacts are clothing, food, and behaviors. The second level of culture is espoused values. Espoused values are aspects of culture that are more difficult to decipher, yet are still possible to discover, usually after more time spent in that culture or with that cultural group. Underlying or basic assumptions, according to Schein (2010), are “implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior” (p. 28). They are unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Some authors (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Triandis, 1994; Trompenaars, 1993) define these basic assumptions as “cultural dimensions”. A cultural dimension is a measurable aspect of culture that can be used to describe and/or explain certain phenomena or cultural artifacts that occur in society (Hofstede et al., 2010). I now explain how various cultural dimensions are applicable to experiential education contexts.

Cultural Dimensions

Cultural dimensions are simple ways in which culture can be described and analyzed. There are a few things to know about cultural dimensions. First, cultural dimensions occur as a spectrum. That is, a culture cannot be one way or another way, but it can occur on any point in between. Second, the grouping of a cultural dimensions for countries is based on trends in data measured from specific populations. Third, culture described as cultural dimensions is always relative to another culture; absolute measures of cultures do not exist. Fourth, despite the ability to measure a cultural dimension (relative to another culture), culture is dynamic and can change. Next, we look at a number of cultural dimensions that relate to experiential education.

Geert Hofstede

Hofstede et al. (2010) described six dimensions that describe aspects culture which include: individualism versus collectivism; power distance; masculinity versus femininity; uncertainty avoidance; long-term orientation versus short-term orientation; and indulgence versus restraint.

Individualism versus collectivism is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Individualist societies are societies in which “the ties between individuals are loose” and everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his/her immediate family” (Hofstede, et al, 2010, p. 92). Collectivism pertains to “societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 92). Usually we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, and often have strong ties to extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents).

Power distance is “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and

organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 61). It can be manifested, among other ways, in a school setting, a work setting, or a government. Power distance exists to some extent within the workings of a social structure in a way to create structure and functionality. This represents inequality, but defined from below, not from above. Power distance suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders.

Masculinity versus femininity is the third dimension. This does not describe gender roles *per se*, but the extent the roles, responsibilities, and obligations are distributed between genders. According to Hofstede et al. (2010) a masculine society is present when “emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (p. 140). A feminine society is present when “emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (p.140).

Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. It indicates the extent members of a certain culture “feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 191). Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual. In short, uncertainty avoidance helps cultures compromise with the unknown. With high uncertainty avoidance, there are formal laws, rules, and regulations. There is an emotional need for laws and regulations, even if they are not followed. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures, people believe that rules should exist only when necessary, and if rules do exist, they feel restrained. In general, uncertainty avoidance leads to a reduction in ambiguity.

Fons Trompenaars

Trompenaars (1993) is another cultural dimension theorist. Most notably relevant to experiential education are the dimensions of internal versus external control, affective versus neutral, and achievement vs. ascription (which was originally based from Parsons' [1951] dimensions [Chanchani & Theivananthampillai, 2009]).

Achievement versus ascription describes how a society awards status to people. Some societies base status on people's achievements, whereas others ascribe it by virtue of age, class, gender, education, and so on (Trompenaars, 1993). *Internal control versus external control* is rooted in the work of J.B. Rotter in the 1960s. This dimension refers to a society's attitude towards nature. Internal control means that people believe that they can and should control nature by imposing their will upon it. External control refers to societies that believe that man is part of nature and must go along with its laws, directions and forces (Trompenaars, 1993).

Affective versus neutral refers to how members of a society express their feelings. Members of cultures which are affectively neutral keep their feelings controlled and subdued. In cultures high on affectivity, people show their feelings plainly and find outlets for their feelings (Trompenaars, 1993).

These cultural dimensions discussed above provide a framework for analyzing features of experiential education programming. I now discuss characteristics, values, and assumptions of experiential education and then analyze them with these cultural dimensions.

So What?

Characteristics, values, and assumptions of experiential education

There are a number of critiques in the field of experiential education arguing that some of the assumptions and values are rooted in western epistemologies and, therefore, limited. Karen Fox (2008) writes that: “experiential education is grounded in Euro-North American epistemologies, as interpreted within the United States, Dewey’s imbrication with the American project, and dominant discourses focused on individualistic identity, cognition, linear verbal processes, and political/ethical undercurrents (p. 39). Seaman (2008) argues that the constructivist perspective of experiential learning is closely linked to Western ideals of individual development. Kolb’s developmental chronology is the “ordering of ages at which developmental achievements become possible in the general conditions of contemporary Western culture” (Kolb, 1984, p. 141). Even “the ability to make choices is central to the concept of freedom in Western culture” (Kolb, 1983, p. 263) which is often found in experiential education practices.

Another example of how euro-centric assumptions are prevalent in experiential education is discussed by three authors who critique the notion of experience and what that might mean in other contexts (Fox, 2008; Seaman, 2008; Roberts, 2008). For example, Fox (2008) argues that the field of experiential education is dominated by perspectives that represent or include a small range related to gender, culture, class, and power which are grounded in a particular Euro-North American worldview (Fox, in Simpson, 2011, p. 40). Fox (2008) also continues to write that;

“Although some experiential educators have hinted at nonphysical and non-cognitive elements, the dominant focus of experiential education is a linear, hands-on, bodily

involvement with cognitive and verbal processing. The relationship between bodily knowledge and cognitive verbal understanding is anything but clear, even as dominant epistemologies and power structures favor cognitive and verbal knowledge in North America” (p. 39-40).

We can look at some of these critiques in more detail through the cultural framework that was described above. In these critiques of practices, I am not necessarily suggesting that these practices be discontinued; rather I suggest ways in which practitioners can be aware of differences in order to inform their practices.

Analysis of characteristics, values, and assumptions of experiential education

There are some common features of experiential education that I focus for this analysis. They include individual development, student-centered teaching, individual challenge and learning, the concept of challenge-by-choice, emotional safety, and reflection/processing activities. Within these common features are embedded assumptions of relatively high level of individuality, low power distance, of low uncertainty avoidance, an internal locus of control, and achievement. Many of the cultural dimensions and features overlap and at times it is difficult to discuss each section discreetly, but this is my best attempt at doing so.

Individual development

As stated before, individualism/collectivism is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. “The group” and “the group process” are very important components of experiential education and are cited by a number of authors. A very relevant part of this dimension for experiential education is the way that people interact with and identify with a group (Triandis et al., 1988). According to Triandis et al. (1988), this dimension refers to how people relate to “in-

groups” and “out-groups”. The major themes of collectivism are self-definition as part of group(s), subordination of personal goals to in-group goals, concern for the integrity of the in-group, and intense emotional attachment to the group (Triandis et al., 1988, p. 35). The major themes of individualism are a self-definition as an entity that is distinct and separate from group(s), emphasis on personal goals even if pursuit of such goals inconveniences the in-group, and less concern and emotional attachment to the in-groups. Several themes, such as self-reliance, achievement, competition, and interdependence change their meanings in the context of cultures. Additionally, Triandis (1989) argued that people in individualist cultures have a high probability to identify elements of a “personal self” by saying things like “I am busy” or “I am kind”. People from collectivist cultures tend to identify elements of the collective self like “my family thinks I am too busy” or “my co-workers think I am kind”. Given these descriptions, it may be easy to see that people from individualist and collectivist cultures would respond somewhat differently to situations depending on how they view themselves in relation to others.

An example of this dimension could be applied in the field of therapeutic outdoor education which is a type of therapy intervention used for improving the functioning of individuals with illness or disabling conditions (American Therapeutic Recreation Association, 2009) utilizing experiential education practices. Mitten (1995) states that “when people form healthy connections they enter relationships where they maintain a separate identity and individual responsibility, yet can still function well in a group and feel a sense of belonging” (p. 83). This is a good example of how one from an individualistic culture, according to Triandis et al. (1988), relates to the group. However, when working with learners from a collectivist context, a participant may relate to the group very differently. By saying that “healthy” relationships are relationships in which a separate identity trumps any group identity is an assumption that may

not apply in more collectivist cultures. To contrast a healthy relationship, Mitten (1995) goes onto to say that, “unhealthy relationships discourage people from feeling good about themselves and from valuing their and others’ differences” (p. 83). Valuing difference may not be a value of a particular culture. In-group cohesion is more important – so much so that one’s difference is overshadowed by the group identity. In this instance, difference is not valued, but instead sameness and group identity are valued. Also related to group identity is the promotion of the development of student “belonging”. According to Carver (1996) “belonging” refers to students developing and maintaining a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of belonging. However, as we saw above, “belonging” may mean different things to different people.

Despite the focus on “the group” in experiential education, a number of authors site the importance of the individual learner. For example, “experiential education tends to focus on creating educational opportunities for individual growth and development” (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999, p. 28). This aligns with Hofstede et al.’s (2010) description of individualist culture where self-actualization by every individual is an ultimate goal. In collectivist societies, however, harmony and consensus in society are ultimate goals (p. 130); individual growth is not valued over the group. Another description of individualism is that “student autonomy, critical thinking and self-reliance can be encouraged throughout the action and reflection cycle.” (Estes, 2004, p. 151). Triandis et al. (1988), state that the term “self-reliance” may change meanings in collectivist versus individualist cultures. Self-reliance for the individualistic cultures implies freedom to do one's own thing and also to compete with others. Self-reliance for the collectivist cultures implies not being a burden on the in-group, and competition is unrelated. Student autonomy is explicitly a value of individualism and individualist identity. Student autonomy,

while valued in many educational spheres, may not be an explicit value in some contexts. Relatedly, self-perception is another value of some experiential education programs. Wilcher (1996) and Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) assert that positive self-perception and increasing participants' self-esteem is one of the most important goals that experiential activities (and outdoor programs) are striving towards (p. 158; in Mitten, 1995, p. 82). Again, the perception of the self is a cultural phenomenon. Tyson and Asmus (2008) write that "if a course culture created by staff values sameness, or certain ideal traits, rather than diversity, participants will mold themselves to fit, rather than express their authentic selves and choices" (p. 269). Implicit in this statement is the value of expressing one's "self" and individual choices. Barker (2008) asserts that "people in other cultures do not always share the individualistic sense of uniqueness and self-consciousness that is widespread in western societies. Instead personhood is inseparable from a network of kinship relations and social obligations" (p. 220). Indeed, practitioners should be aware of the strong sense of individualism inherent in some experiential education programming.

The cultural dimension of masculinity versus femininity is also relevant for the value of increasing a student's individual self-esteem. In an interesting study done with U.S. and Dutch youth, the conclusion was drawn that "young people in U.S. society have been socialized to boost their egos: they take both their problems and their competencies seriously while young people in the Netherlands are socialized to efface ego" (Hofstede, et al., 2010, p. 162). Masculine societies are more likely characterized by competitiveness and an ego whereas feminine societies are less likely characterized by that.

Student-centered teaching

The cultural dimension of power distance becomes most apparent during student-centered teaching practices in the field. A number of authors have advocated for a student-centered approach in experiential education. Joplin (1981) writes that an explicit value of experiential education is that it is “student rather than teacher based” (p. 20 in Estes p. 151). Lindsay and Ewert (1999) affirm that in experiential education “learning outcomes are often student-directed rather than teacher-directed” (p. 27) and Andresen, Boud, and Cohen, (2000) also agree that the experience of the learner is central to teaching and learning.

One way to achieve a student-centered environment, according to many experiential educators, is to decrease the power distance between the teacher and the student, as evidenced by Cheryl Estes (2004) who advocates for an increase in the use of student-centered facilitation techniques in experiential education and facilitator training programs in her article “*Promoting Student-Centered Learning in Experiential Education*”. Here she says, “to the extent that experiential educators assume power over students by over-controlling their reflection on experience, they devalue both the experience and the students’ role in their own learning” (in Carver, 1996, p.150-151). Vokey (1987, in Estes, 2004) believes that teacher control over metaphors and student processing “conveys a message of control over students rather than student empowerment” (p. 146). According to Chapman, et al. (1992), the role of the “teacher” is to (1) provide minimum necessary structure for students to be successful, but no more (2) help students make connections and (3) be intentional – that is, teaching towards an objective (p. 5). Merriam (2007) says that in a student-centered environment, educators serve as facilitators for reflection, create a safe environment, are coaches or mentors, and are catalysts by doing activities (Merriam, 2007). Another way student-centeredness can be achieved is to “let students

decide what they need to learn (Wilson, 1995). Similarly, as suggested by Estes (2004), is to allow students to set their own individual and group goals.

I am not advocating against a student-centered approach to experiential education, but I am suggesting that lowering the power distance in order to achieve student-centeredness may have implications for learners who hold basic assumptions about a large power distance. The student-centered approach to teaching described above is not always the dominant form in other cultural contexts. In other contexts, classrooms are teacher-centered where the teacher is “all-knowing”, authoritative, and has control over a class or group of learners. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), a feature of large power distance cultures is that teachers should take all initiatives in class (p. 72). People from large power distance cultures also view teachers as “gurus” who transfer personal wisdom (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 72). Indeed, this is the opposite of what many experiential educators try to achieve. This perspective may not coincide with what another practitioner asserts in that “empowering participants to feel like they own their learning experience and have control from the start of their group experience can encourage participation and “buy-in” by group members” (Stanchfield, 2007, p.46). If a learner expects a teacher to know all the information and control the class, then that learner might be disoriented and distrust the group rather than “buying-in” to the group.

Individual challenge and learning

Individual challenge and stepping out of one’s “comfort zone” is a common feature of experiential education programs. For example, Nadler (1995) writes that:

“One of the cornerstones of adventure-based experiences is to encourage people to do things that they are unlikely to do on their own. We invite them to leave their safe,

familiar, comfortable, and predictable world for uncomfortable new territory. The activities are usually in a new territory for most students, but so are the emotions, thoughts, and interactions that accompany these experiences. Often students feel scared, anxious, awkward, unfamiliar, and at risk as they venture from the known to unknown turf.” (p. 52).

Carver (1997) mentioned, too, that student learning is achieved through the processes of “facing challenges, choosing battles, conquering fears, building on strengths, overcoming weakness, participating in activities that allow for skill development and development of knowledge about areas of interest to the student, asserting one’s needs, struggling” (p. 146). Service-learning has a similar goal which is to expose privileged students to underprivileged people as a way to take them out of their comfort zone, thus learning about “the other” (Urraca, Ledoux, & Harris, 2009; Shin, 2011; Mitchell, 2008; Jones, & Hill, 2001).

Practitioners in outdoor and adventure education may use the model in Figure 7 when facilitating students’ learning. This model could also be applied in other educational contexts such as service-learning. The model has three zones - the comfort zone, the growth zone, and the panic zone - where a participant is placed with regards to how s/he feels about an experience. If an experience occurs within one’s “comfort zone”, the person is able to negotiate the situation based on prior experience; very little learning occurs. If an experience takes a learner past her or his “growth zone” into the “panic zone”, then the fight-or-flight response is activated in a participant. S/he will use defense strategies; again, little learning occurs. This is also the zone where a mis-educative experience can occur. If an experience occurs on the edge of one’s “comfort zone”, that is the “growth zone”, then a participant is stretched just enough to where he or she has to negotiate a new situation without reverting to defense mechanisms; in this case,

learning occurs. Many practitioners plan programs and facilitate so that participants are in their “growth zones” during programming.

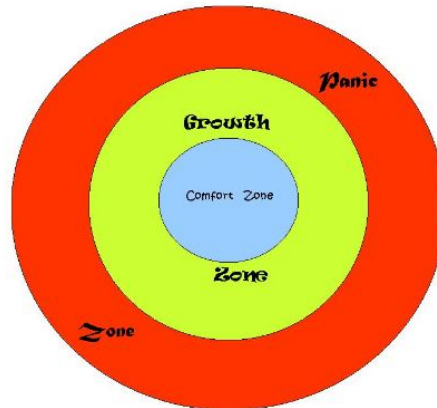


Figure 7: Learning zones (Nadler 1995)

In Nadler’s (1995) article, he describes breaking out of one’s comfort zone as a “success”. This means that stepping out of one’s comfort zone is the preferred place to be during an experience and is more highly valued than staying in one’s comfort zone.

Some cultures might not value coming “out” of a comfort zone, especially in a very high uncertainty avoidance culture, so the motivation to do so may be different. In fact, Green (1977) suggests that the “perception of risk may even have a culturally dictated component, and leaders should attempt to understand the culturally specific assumptions under which their clients live” (p. 306). In low uncertainty avoidance cultures, results are attributed to one’s ability, but in strong uncertainty avoidance cultures, people often use outside explanations for phenomena and results are attributed to luck, fate, or circumstances (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 208). This is also related to the cultural dimension of internal control versus external control. When one faces a challenging situation, one might attribute the challenge to nature and may not perceive the situation as something to “overcome”. The assertion of learning happening outside of one’s comfort zone has been challenged in U.S. contexts somewhat. Tyson and Asmus (2008) argue

that participants still learn from an experience even if they don't "stretch" enough. The same authors also argue that a facilitator's value's, explicit or implicit, may affect a participant's choice, so no matter what basic assumptions the participant has, it is important for a facilitator to be aware of her or his own basic assumptions.

AEE lists "being creative" as a principle of experiential education which is also related to this paradigm. By finding unique and creative ways to overcome challenges, learners may develop creativity. Belief in control over nature moves people to value creativity. With creativity humans can control and manipulate nature to solve problems.

The cultural dimensions of achievement versus ascription may also be relevant for growth zone learning. "Evaluation strategies in experiential education are often focused on task accomplishment" rather than by reference to criteria outside of the student's control (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999, p. 27). Certainly, overcoming a fear or doing something you are not comfortable with has value, not just in learning, but it what one might "do". As mentioned before, Nadler (1995) describes breaking out of one's comfort zone as a "success", as if it were something to "achieve". "Growing" could also mean that someone needs to do or "achieve" something in order to be a better person. In a culture that values ascription more, challenging oneself does not bring worth and may therefore be an unnecessary endeavor.

Challenge-by-choice

Challenge-by-choice is another established feature in some experiential education programming related to individual growth zone of learning. Challenge-by-choice suggests that a participant in an activity has a choice with how far s/he would like to push him or herself out of the comfort zone. The conscious challenge-by-choice model outlines principles and actions that support

experiential educators in creating an environment in which participants can develop the skills and self-awareness to make positive, self-affirming choices that are appropriate for their stage of development. Surely, the strength in challenge-by-choice is an awareness that the freedom to make one's own choices is central to an experience of personal empowerment (Tyson & Asmus, 2008). At the same time, the ability to make choices is central to the concept of freedom in Western culture which is often found in experiential education practices (Tyson & Asmus, 2008). Feminist theory recognizes that the choosing self and its desires and ability to act are results of a social construct (Hirschmann, 2003). In a paper about ethical practices in educational evaluation by Rallis, Rossman, & Gajda (2007), participants are often given free will to agree to participate or withdraw at any time. In reality, however, "what does this mean in contexts where participation is not negotiable because of one's status as a civil servant?" (p. 405). This is a type of social context in which participants may feel an obligation to participate and are not "empowered" to make a choice.

The cultural dimension of internal versus external control, also called the locus of control, is also relevant for challenge-by-choice. Walsh (1996) asserts that often when people feel out of control, they feel most at-risk. Davis-Berman and Berman (2002) also agree that participants (especially beginners) in outdoor programs are "very vulnerable to this lack of control" (p. 306). How one deals with the feeling of being "out of control" could be the way control is attribute to internal or external influences. The conscious challenge-by-choice model is based on one assumption that "life circumstances are created largely through choices, conscious or not, and the ability to choose the most positive or growth-full direction has huge ramifications for the quality of one's life" (Tyson & Asmus, 2008, p. 270). The belief is that life is made of a series of choices that impact quality and well-being. "Students learn experientially how their

choices affect their relationships and personal growth” and that they are “in charge of their attitudes and choices” (Marlowe, Pearl, & Marlowe, 2009, p. 5). Cultures that believe less in internal control and more in external control would not see this. Some might believe that God or another outside influence impacts one’s life more than some choices that are made. In fact, Tyson and Asmus (2008) go on to write that making a conscious choice requires a belief that one has the power to impact the outcome. The value of making “authentic” choices is not as relevant.

Challenge-by-choice also is influenced by individualist values as evidenced by Tyson and Asmus (2008) when they write that “participants may make a choice that decreases social pressure or satisfies an immediate need but in the process sacrifices a deeper level of their own truth” (p. 270). It is also apparent in Marlowe, Pearl, and Marlowe (2009) when they assert that youth realize the power of their own independence when they recognize their ability to choose between positive and negative thoughts and choices. Again, to some people, choosing to adhere to group norms may become more important in certain contexts than one’s individual “truths” or independence.

“Emotional safety”

Emotional safety is a feature of experiential education program. Emotional safety is difficult to define, yet it can be summarized as a “perceived freedom from psychological harm” (Vincent, 1994). Emotional safety is important for many programs because if participants feel safe, learning will happen. “This is consistent with Maslow’s (1954) ideas about the hierarchy of human needs; the imperative being that for healthy growth and functioning, the basic needs of security and love must be met” (Davis-Berman, & Berman, 2002, p. 309). Emotional safety is perceived by an individual in reaction to a situation, and those individual reactions are embedded

in a cultural context. This feature is related to group dynamics of individualist and collectivist cultures as mentioned above, to power distance as mentioned above, to uncertainty avoidance and internal versus external control also as mentioned above. One's perception of how s/he relates to a group, to a person of power, and to nature affect how "safe" one feels. As practitioners are likely already aware, there are many interactions that relate to emotional safety. Cultural dimensions could be another form of interaction with emotional safety.

Reflection/processing activities

Reflection is a central aspect of experiential learning and experiential education; it is where learning is believed to occur and is generally a pre-planned part of programming. It is an "essential way for students to bridge doing and understanding" (Dubinsky, 2006, p. 307). Joplin (1995) believes that in the reflection phase, learning is recognized, articulated, and evaluated. Reflection sorts and orders information, often involving personal perceptions and beliefs. According to Knapp (1995), in order to learn from experience, we must take the time to sort the relevant and useful information from irrelevant and useless information. Then we can analyze these elements in greater depth, considering the perspectives of both thinking and feeling. Finally, we can generalize our thoughts and feelings in order to plan for the future.

Dubinsky (2006) argues that "creating reflection assignments enables [students] to ponder and evaluate their experience, consider its value, and transform it into knowledge they will use later as writers and citizens" (p. 310). In addition, it is strongly recommended that a processing activity be ideally designed to address all types of learning including cognitive [knowledge], psychomotor [skills], and affective [feelings], and not artificially limit the focus of the learner's experience through consideration of only one aspect of development (Quinsland &

Yust, 1982 in Quinsland & Van Ginkel, 1984) as well as address different types of emotional intelligence. I argue that it should also take into account cultural variation, when appropriate.

There are a number of methods for reflection and processing that practitioners use. They include but are not limited to games, role-plays, discussions, doing a project, giving a presentation, debriefing circles, journaling, and writing a paper. Joplin (1995) strongly believes that the reflection phase needs to be made public through these means (in Knapp, 1995, p. 37).

In situations when reflection occurs as a verbal description or share-out of one's thoughts, a number of issues might arise because of one's position on an individualist/collectivist spectrum. For example, in individualist cultures, students are more likely to be expected to individually speak up in class but in collectivist cultures students may speak up in class only when sanctioned by the group to do so (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 124). For this reason, a verbal share-out may not be sufficient in some circumstances for reflection. Verbal processing may not produce the depth of reflection a facilitator is hoping for. Additionally, in an individualist society, students may more likely express a private opinion, but in a collectivist society, opinions are often pre-determined by group membership (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 130). If harmony is an ultimate goal of one's development instead of self-actualization, then having an opinion different from someone else in the group would be inappropriate. While experiential education philosophy values individual development, practitioners should be aware that some participants may understand that value differently.

The cultural dimension of masculinity/femininity may also be relevant for reflection activities. According to AEE, experiences "are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results" ("What is experiential education?", 2012). Also, "throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions,

investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning” (“What is experiential education?”, 2012). Assertiveness and taking initiative are, according to Hofstede et al. (2010) masculine traits. In very feminine societies, such behaviors are not considered appropriate. Also, according to Hofstede et al. (2010), in masculine cultures students try to make themselves visible in class and compete openly with each other. Encouraging a quieter or weaker or underperforming student is considered a feminine trait; assertive behavior and attempts at excelling are easily ridiculed and “excellence” is something one keeps to one’s self. (p. 160). One explicit value of Outward Bound is “excellence - being your best self, pursuing craftsmanship in your actions, and living a healthy and balanced life” (“Philosophy”, 2012). Educators may find some resistance during certain reflection activities due to these characteristics. I will note that many of these behaviors could also be attributed to personality traits such as shyness or introversion and extroversion. However, similar behaviors play out on a cultural level, and this is the level that I address here.

In some situations, activities require a high level of energy. The cultural dimension of affective versus neutral may be fitting. Affective cultures many express their emotions, whereas people from neutral cultures may not express emotions. Reactions to situations may cause a facilitator to misinterpret the mood or feelings of a participant. If a participant does not seem engaged or “happy”, it might not mean that he or she necessarily isn’t. It just may be a manifestation of the neutral values of his or her culture. It might also be stressful for a student to be surrounded by exceptional energy and noise.

To summarize, the features of experiential education that I have analyzed have basic cultural assumptions of high individuality, low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, high achievement, emphasis on internal control, and possible interaction with ascriptive dispositions

and masculine characteristics. In the next section, I explore what implications these findings might have for experiential educators.

Now What?

In the sections above, I described some common features found in the experiential education literature and analyzed them using cultural dimensions. By its very nature, some tenets of experiential education may conflict with certain cultural values. To repeat, I do advocate that experiential education tenets such as student-centered learning, individualism, or other features described above should not necessarily change. Instead, my purpose is to continue a conversation about values and assumptions of experiential education and the possible implications for practitioners in a cultural context.

With modification, I believe experiential education can succeed in different cultural contexts. I cannot give definitive answers or recommendations to dilemmas practitioners might face because I do not have knowledge about the specific situations that practitioners are in. However, I will propose a few alternatives to the situations I described above. These suggestions should not be taken without reflection and an understanding of the situation in which they will be applied. Otherwise, similar issues of using facilitation methods without an understanding of context could happen.

When working with new communities or cultures, a practitioner can hold a focus group, as Ritchie et al. (2010) demonstrated, in order to research the values of the community and involve the community in the programming process. In this study, the researchers used community based action research of Aboriginal elders and mental health workers to develop a

10-day outdoor leadership training program. Here, community members were empowered to participate and include their values about what they want their youth to learn. The practitioners then used the information to co-create the program.

Basic cultural assumptions are usually unconscious so it may not be possible for people to articulate some of the values or assumptions that programming entails. If it is not possible for practitioners to do a focus group or if values and/or basic assumptions are not articulated, there are a few general strategies that can be used. Gallois, C. & Callan, V. (1997) offer some basic strategies for communicating cross-culturally. To sum, one can use the knowledge of the value dimensions by active listening and observing verbal and non-verbal behavior. One can form a hypothesis based on that information. Where possible, one should check their hypotheses through any number of means such as speaking to people, books, or mass media. Finally, one should remember that hypotheses are just that: guesses and inferences. Any number of factors could contribute to what a person is thinking. It is also important to remember that cross cultural communication involves ambiguity and uncertainty.

Below are some more specific strategies that can be used while operating in different cultures. For example, students who may experience discomfort in low power distance contexts because they come from a high power distance context could be reminded about expectations of behaviors with facilitators. A student's behavior could be corrected if he or she reverts to behaviors typical of a high power distance environment. For example, they can be reminded that they can call group leaders or facilitators by their first names. They can also be reminded that they may speak out without permission from the facilitator ("Power Distance Index", 2010).

If practitioners work with a higher uncertainty avoidance culture, then more time may be needed for participants to gain confidence in new activities or ideas. It may also be beneficial to

involve local counterparts in the decision-making, programming, or facilitation so that there is more familiarity in the programming (“Uncertainty Avoidance Index”, 2010).

If one is working with people with higher collectivism then individuals may have a strong sense of responsibility for their family which can mean that family takes precedence over the program or task. Also, praise and rewards could be directed to a team rather than individuals so it does not cause embarrassment. Sometimes in collectivist cultures, promotions depend upon seniority and experience - not on performance and achievement so rewarding experience rather than accomplishing a task may be more meaningful (“Multicultural Impact”, 1999).

If one will be working with more ascriptive cultures, then a practitioner should respect the status and influence, even if he or she may not seem to possess as much knowledge. It may also help to use the title that reflects the degree of influence in the organization in order to build credibility (“Multicultural Impact”, 1999).

Educators may use non-verbal communication cues to judge how participants are doing during an activity. However, practitioners should be aware that non-verbal communication varies between cultures. Similarly, educators may misinterpret the reactions of people from more affectively neutral or more affective cultures depending on the context. For example, a participant may not smile or appear to be openly excited about a particular activity while other participants appear so. People from more affectively neutral cultures may not express their excitement or happiness through a smile so an educator should not misinterpret a participant’s “happiness”. Similarly, a number of activities may pose some perceived risk to participants which might cause them to be fearful. While one could argue that fear is a universal emotion, fear is not expressed the same way in all cultures. Therefore, practitioners may have a more

difficult time perceiving “fear” in a participant and should take that into consideration during risky activities.

Finally, when one holds the assumption of external control, one may believe that God controls things or that one’s fate is not dependent on one’s actions. It might be helpful for a practitioner to be aware that participants may attribute outcomes to God or other natural force rather than on the consequences of human action. If this is the case then the implication may be a new way to think about completing a task.

Conclusion

The structure of culture defined by Schein (2010) can be described as basic cultural assumptions which inform cultural values which, in turn, influence observable cultural artifacts. Cultural assumptions can be categorized into cultural dimensions which are measurable aspects of culture that can be used to describe and/or explain certain phenomena or cultural artifacts that occur in society (Hofstede et al., 2010). Common features of experiential education include individual development, student-centered teaching, individual challenge and learning, challenge-by-choice, “emotional safety”, and reflection/processing activities. To summarize again, the features of experiential education that I have analyzed have basic cultural assumptions of high individuality, low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, high achievement, emphasis on internal control, and possible interaction with ascriptive dispositions and masculine characteristics. These assumptions may have implications for practitioners practicing cross-culturally.

In all cases, a practitioner should do their best to proactively learn about their participants if possible, despite where they come from. As I mentioned previously, a significant strength of experiential education is its ability for the learning process to be student-centered and to allow

space for individual student experience, interpretation, and learning. There is certainly potential for experiential education to accommodate these great differences, yet still be able to accomplish its values and goals. With awareness, reflective practitioners can move beyond cultural prejudice and practice in socially just ways.

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