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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: INVESTIGATING LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTIC LEARNER ACTIVITIES

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: INVESTIGATING LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTIC LEARNER ACTIVITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning is promoted by Otago Polytechnic (OP) as the approach that is used for the delivery of its programmes. So how do lecturers view this approach? What does it mean to them in terms of how it affects their students' experience and their endeavours to teach them? To answer these questions, I interviewed a group of OP lecturers in a range of disciplines at tertiary level in order to gain an insight into their understanding of experiential learning in practice. In this article, I will analyse their perceptions with regard to the challenges and benefits of following an experiential approach in their practice.

There is no shortage of literature on the theory of experiential learning, as well as on its application in practical terms (see, for example, Kolb, 1984). The purpose of the approach is to foster "active learning" (Lewis & Williams, 1994) or "collaborative learning" (Barkley et al., 2014) through problem-solving (Warren, 1995; Wurdinger, 2005) in a relevant, student-centred context that will engage and motivate students (Wurdinger, 2005). Lewis and Williams (1994) make a distinction between field-based experiences (internships, practicums, etc.) and classroom-based learning (simulations, role-plays, etc.), where the latter can now also be applied to online or blended delivery. Relevance is a key factor in either case, which for our students must be linked to their vocational field of study.

The transferable skills or "learner capabilities" (Otago Polytechnic, 2021) that students develop through such activities are as much about the ability to function effectively in the world of work as they are about performing specific tasks with professional expertise. Of these skills, the most highly valued by employers are teamwork and interpersonal behaviour (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). Finally, experiential activities are also reflective: "Learners need the opportunity to reflect on, defend, and share what they have learned if it is to become part of their available repertoire" (Merrill, 2002, p. 51). In vocational education, reflective stages in an activity help students to be better prepared for dealing with the complexities of real life (Schön, 1983).

The focus of my research is not field-based but essentially classroom-based learning, though it does extend to field trips and other external events, as well as asynchronous online work by students. In accordance with the overview outlined above, a shared conception of the experiential approach was reached through one-to-one discussions with every participant in this study, in the context of a learner activity which they contributed to the resource bank described in the Methods section. In each case it was understood and agreed that learner activities:

- are hands-on
- relate to a context in the world of work
- require students to interact together
- allow them to reflect on their experience.

Special emphasis was placed on making student learning authentic and interactive. Authentic activities were defined as i) set in a specific work-related context and ii) resembling tasks that would normally be performed by professionals in that context. As for interactivity, this was taken to mean that learner activities can only be completed by having students talking and/or writing to each other, whether in pairs, in small groups or in larger teams. The importance of combining authentic and interactive features in the design of experiential learning was assumed to apply in equal measure to face-to-face and online classes. With the constant development of communication technology, getting students to interact as fully in a virtual environment as they would in a physical classroom is becoming increasingly feasible.

Perhaps what is more of an issue is the notion of an activity being 'authentic.' Some commentators have criticised this concept for its dependence on how the teacher interprets reality. Instead of a replication of what happens in real life, students are given an imaginative product which Petraglia (1998) called "the real world on a short leash" (p. 53). In response, Herrington and Reeves (2002) have compared students' engagement in these activities to the "suspension of disbelief" which audiences experience with movies. In activities that "simulate a real-life context for learning, a similar suspension of disbelief is required" (p. 3). The authors acknowledge that students who are unfamiliar with "authentic activities" often regard them as time-wasting, lacking in academic rigour and getting in the way of their learning. These students are not yet ready to suspend their disbelief in order to engage with the content of such activities. Once they do, they can get over their initial doubts and achieve "the cognitive engagement that higher order learning requires" (p. 8). They begin to appreciate how authenticity (and reflective practice) will help them to face the more unpredictable challenges of their future employment.

This article explores the different ways in which a number of OP lecturers perceive experiential learning in the context of their own teaching practice. It enquires into how they see the problems as well the advantages that are associated with this approach, both from the lecturer's and the student's point of view. Special attention is given to how these lecturers talk about such activities in terms of student engagement, practicality, authenticity in the world of work and interactivity, both in the classroom and online.

METHODS

This research into lecturers' perceptions took place in the context of a wider project to develop a resource bank of authentic activities for teaching staff at OP. Lecturers were invited to contribute their own activities for the resource bank, and semi-structured one-to-one interviews were recorded in which the participants were asked to clarify the nature of their activity. Of particular interest was the question of how it could be delivered online, as well as face-to-face, since the interviews took place during COVID-19 restrictions in 2021 and the lecturers were teaching online at the time.

In each interview, the researcher and the participant looked at one activity together in sufficient detail in order to establish common ground in their understanding of experiential learning, and to agree on a working definition (see Introduction). This procedure enabled the study to be partly framed within a constructivist paradigm where meaning is co-created and perceptions can be described in their subjectivity. Further questions were asked regarding what the participants considered to be the main challenges and benefits of experiential activities like the one discussed. Where challenges for the lecturer are concerned, the conversation was focused on perceived risks (for example, not achieving course aims) as well as barriers (for example, student reluctance to accept teaching methods they are not accustomed to).

A mixed-mode pragmatic approach was taken in order to provide both quantifiable data for identifying and comparing the more general views expressed, and qualitative data for a deeper understanding of experiential learning in practice. Answers to standard questions were coded and quantified, while the reasons given for these answers were also noted. The transcripts were then carefully studied for discourse analysis of their content in relation to student engagement and the four characteristics of experiential activities highlighted in the Introduction (hands-on, work-related, interactive and reflective). The data thus collected were organised

and examined through an explanatory sequential design where the results of quantitative research provide a platform for a discussion of more qualitative findings (Creswell, 2013). Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the AIC Ethics Committee.

FINDINGS

There were 18 participants in all, with equal numbers of male and female lecturers overall teaching applied management, construction, information technology and English. These lecturers identified a number of barriers to the implementation of experiential learning, including i) the complexity of their role and workload. As expected, a majority of participants (56 percent) indicated that they saw this as the main barrier, for reasons generally related to the time spent on designing and planning activities. One lecturer put the blame squarely on "lack of effort ... or lack of energy." Other reasons were about keeping up to date on current practices in industry or engaging students in authentic situations, where the time and effort involved are more implicit. Only one participant talked specifically about the delivery of activities, which may require the lecturer to deal with students' problems. At the same time, two further barriers were seen as significant, namely ii) the negative response of some students (due to their reluctance to participate, lack of learner training, teacher dependence, etc.) and iii) a tendency among students to focus exclusively on assessment. What the latter brings out in this context is the need for a seamless integration of experiential activities and assessment tasks.

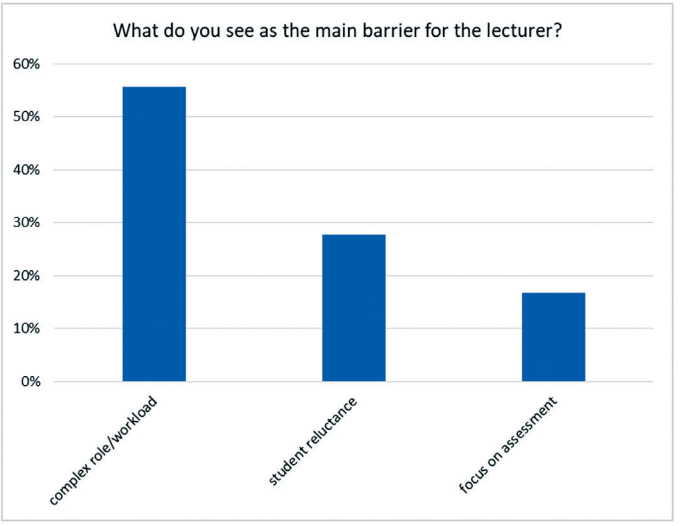

Figure 1. Challenges of experiential learning (1).

When asked about the biggest risk associated with teaching with experiential activities, participants thought of a wider range of factors. There is the risk that i) course objectives may not be achieved, which 50 percent of participants viewed as the most consequential. The reasons for this were also wide-ranging, from class management issues (misunderstood instructions, students' own time management, technical problems with equipment and resources) to considerations of planning that result in a mismatch of activity objectives to course outcomes. As one participant remarked, "We can't just use activities for the sake of using them, we really need to keep the objectives in mind." Other major risks were about students ii) going off-task/not engaging, iii) feeling they were wasting their time, or iv) losing their trust in the lecturer. The focus was more on negative student perceptions than on achieving course objectives, though the two are obviously connected.

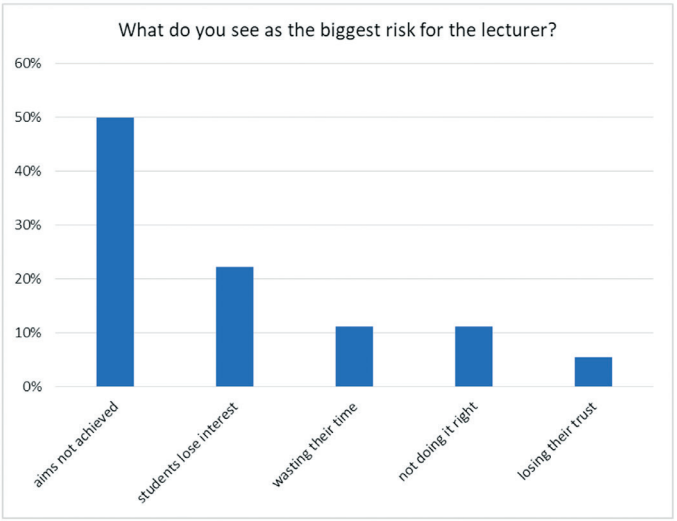

Figure 2. Challenges of experiential learning (2).

As for the main benefit of experiential activities for the lecturer, a variety of responses emerged, with i) enhanced student motivation as the most significant among them (44 percent of answers given). This was largely for reasons of enjoyment (positive atmosphere, creative lessons) or practicality (usefulness/relevance of hands-on tasks). It is worth noting here that only two lecturers mentioned student-to-student interaction. Next in order of importance were ii) alignment with course aims and iii) more in-depth learning, where work-related skills and collaboration were the most frequently mentioned reasons for these benefits. In other words, group work and authenticity are definitely valued by the participants, although this may not necessarily involve a great deal of communication between students. It is possible for some of the more technical activities to be completed by students working alongside each other rather than interacting effectively as a team.

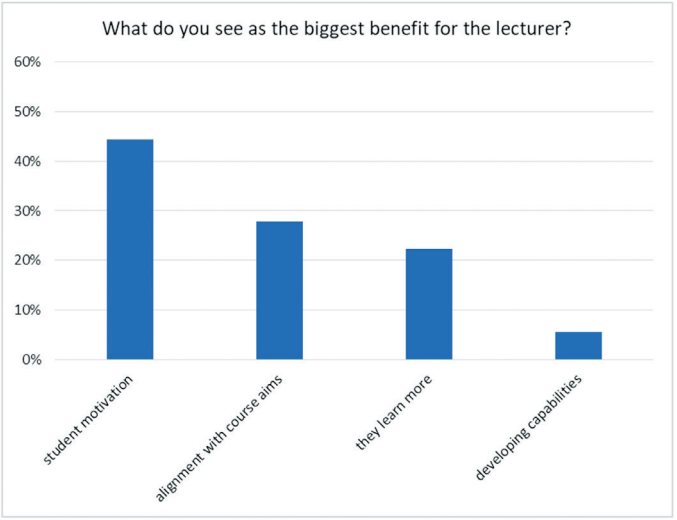

Figure 3. Benefits of experiential learning (1).

So, what about the main challenge from the students' point of view? The answers to this question did not produce any clear-cut results. For a relatively small proportion of lecturers, a major difficulty was that i) students sometimes lack experience of this approach to teaching and learning (28 percent). The reason for this, according to one lecturer, was that some students are not used to communicating with people from different cultures. Another answer given was that ii) non-native speakers struggle with using English in real-world tasks, which according to a few participants can lead to a breakdown in communication. This is different from iii) students not knowing how to complete an activity, where the lack of confidence has more to do with problem-solving skills than language. A not unexpected answer was that iv) unfair distributions of the workload can occur in different groups, one reason being that highly motivated students end up with less motivated ones.

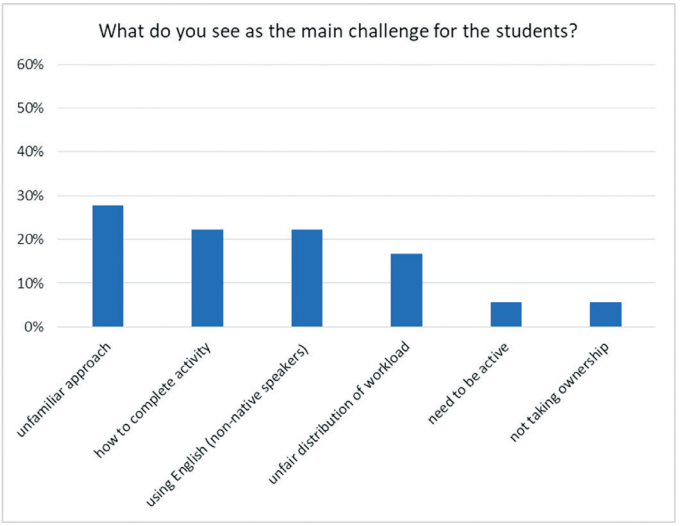

Figure 4. Challenges of experiential learning (3).

As with the challenges for students, there was not much consensus between the participants about what their students gain from learning experientially. Some believed the main benefit was i) how it affects their motivation (33 percent), which half of these participants accounted for in terms of students appreciating the relevance of their learning, and one saw more as a consequence of the enjoyment they get from communicating with each other. The remaining commonly held views were to do with ii) a clearer focus on course aims on the part of students or iii) generally productive lessons. Once again, motivating students and achieving course aims are recognised as key benefits of experiential learning. The close association between these two factors becomes all the more evident in the way most participants explained the latter – in other words, as dependent on its relevance to the world of work.

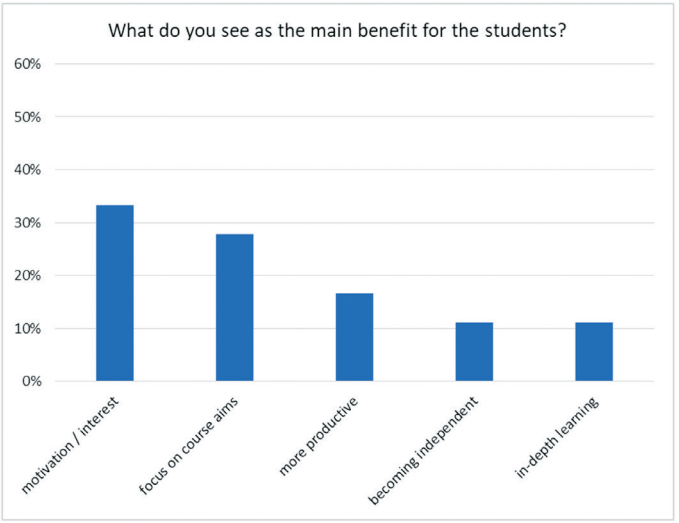

Figure 5. Benefits of experiential learning (2).

Overall, lecturers were generally confident about their awareness of experiential learning at a theoretical level and also in practice. They were able to discuss its challenges and benefits with reference to their own classes and consider their students' perspectives in some depth, as well as that of the lecturer. What these findings do not reveal is the extent to which the approach is actually applied in their teaching. But their perceptions can be compared to other studies, notably Wurdinger and Allison (2017) who conducted a survey of 295 university academics in different disciplines. When asked about the main obstacle to implementing experiential learning, "sixty-one percent said not enough time" (p. 33). This figure is not far from the 56 percent of OP lecturers interviewed who gave the same answer. Wurdinger and Allison also found that 17 percent of participants blamed assessment procedures, which is identical to the percentage in this study.

The risks of an experiential approach, meanwhile, are more difficult to evaluate. A conference paper on risk in higher education (Solanas et al., 2016) reports that academic literature has little to say "regarding the teachers' own perception and experience of risk and risk taking when designing and implementing innovative practices" (p. 7178). While these authors were asking about innovation in general, it is nevertheless clear that "experiential learning, role play and simulations" (p. 7180) featured prominently in their research. Based on views expressed by lecturers with a range of specialisms, their work is entirely qualitative, but it allows them to assert that the lecturers involved "feared the consequences of innovation on their personal life, their professional career and, above everything else, on student learning" (p. 7184). Similarly, at least half of the participants in my study worried about the effect that an experiential approach might have on the achievement of their course aims.

The views expressed by lecturers give a broad account of their perception of experiential learning. For more specific insights into their understanding of this approach, the transcripts can be analysed for their linguistic content. What this shows, first and foremost, is a much greater preoccupation with authenticity and engagement than with practicality, interaction or reflection. The word 'real' was often used to describe learner activities. Typical examples from different lecturers include:

> "We're attempting to mirror or reflect what real life is going to be like."
>
> "We want to create a more active, engaging environment, to replicate a real working environment."
>
> "One thing I like to do when I'm preparing these activities is to link them to something that's real."

> "So, what you want to do is create a scenario or create a context which is real for them [the students]."

Another aspect that tended to be stressed is the 'work-related' or 'work-based' character of this type of learning in practice, as in the reference to "a real working environment." Other instances of this are:

> "Now, what's the skills they've learned? In terms of workplace development."
>
> "Can I use it in my personal life? Can I use it in my … at work?"
>
> "But then the application, putting that through to the business world is often hard work."

The predominant view to emerge from the transcripts is that experiential learning is 'real,' as opposed to purely academic, and offers a context for skills development that is much closer to the world of work. Student engagement also came up quite frequently, sometimes in conjunction with authenticity, as already seen in the comment about the need for an "active, engaging environment, to replicate a real working environment." The link between engagement and experiential learning was even more explicit in some cases; for instance: "It makes students more engaged." This lecturer ascribed the students' engagement to the variety of activities that become possible through the experiential approach. For another participant, students need to be fully engaged for activities to work at all. Several reported that students are clearly motivated by authentic activities, while others expressed concern and even disappointment at the lack of participation they encountered at times. So the level of engagement involved, whether positive or negative, was a main point of discussion during interviews.

The concept of interactivity, on the other hand, was relatively underused, despite the relevance of communication skills in vocational education. Not only were teamwork and interpersonal behaviour the most highly-rated skills in OP's survey of employers, but verbal communication came next in their ranking of learner capabilities (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). Preparing students effectively for the workplace, in other words, depends as much on giving them opportunities to communicate with each other as making the focus of their work as real and lifelike as possible. However, some lecturers did emphasise the value of students talking to each other or learning from each other (presumably through communication in groups).

As with engagement, they also felt that lack of interaction was a significant problem. Take, for instance: "They don't interact. [That's what] students do when they are not comfortable in the group." One participant described having to intervene: "I explained to them that it's important to interact and if you are having any issues you [should be] coming up with those issues rather than just sitting back." Another saw technology as the cause of such situations: "I think that's the biggest issue, getting them to truly communicate with each other when they're in front of a screen so the whole context seems a bit detached and cold."

In my discussions with lecturers, the most neglected aspect of experiential learning was reflection and critical thinking. Only a few of the participants acknowledged the role that it plays in learner activities:

> "And then they're reflecting on what they have completed."
>
> "It also will help students' own learning autonomy, because … they reflect on things."
>
> "And then they're reflecting on what they have completed. They're learning from each other, reflecting on their own practices. So this gives them an opportunity to talk a lot."

The first of these speakers was also conscious of the need for effective time management to ensure that students are able to complete the more hands-on phase of the learning process, without which there can be no meaningful reflection. The other two, meanwhile, made interesting connections with learner autonomy and interaction between students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The lecturers in the study chose to prioritise the authentic nature of experiential learning in their thoughts about its benefits and challenges. This was generally understood to differentiate such activities from a more academic approach, where student participation is greatly reduced and learning processes are assumed to be more passive. References were also made to the practical, interactive and reflective aspects of experiential learning, usually in the context of group work. Judging from the data gathered in these interviews, there was a shared belief in collaborative learning among the participants.

The concept of collaboration is implicit in the working definition of experiential learning established in each interview (in other words, students are required to interact with each other). It is presented as an integral part of authentic activities in the literature on this topic, notably in the work of Herrington, Oliver and Reeves, who have devised a well-known set of characteristics for their design. They describe collaboration as "integral to the task, both within the course and the real world, rather than achievable by an individual learner" (Reeves et al., 2002, p. 564). It is worth pointing out that these authors are concerned with online learning.

Also in the context of higher education online, Parker equates collaboration with communication when observing: "Many researchers believe that authentic tasks supported by the affordances of new technologies that enable people to communicate and collaborate have the potential to improve student engagement and knowledge construction" (2011, p. 4). Effective collaboration rests on effective communication – hence the phrase "communicate and collaborate" doesn't really work when inverted. In short, (online) collaboration depends on "appropriate tasks and communication" (Herrington, 2006, p. 3).

Participants thought primarily about the appropriateness of their tasks, which involved teamwork and the use of technology. They intended their teaching to be relevant to the workplace. In some cases, the collaboration they described was not unlike the way it would happen in the real world. But for such activities to be fully authentic, particular attention needs to be paid to the way that people in these situations would normally communicate. This requires more than simply providing communication technology or setting up "appropriate means of communication" (Herrington, 2006, p. 3). If students are to develop the learner capabilities or soft skills that employers are looking for, they need structured practice in how to communicate effectively and this should be built into the design of learner activities.

As indicated above, collaboration can sometimes take place without full communication between students, who may be working independently within their team in order to achieve a common goal. A lecturer explained the problem while recalling a dysfunctional group: "It's not that they were not doing their work, but they were not interacting, which they should have been, given that they were put into groups to be able to brainstorm." The students were engaging with the task but not with each other.

A number of other lecturers talked about similar situations, which they ascribed to various factors including shyness and lack of motivation. In some cases, the tasks are not even completed and objectives are not met as a result. In the words of one participant: "They don't interact, they don't do the activity and they don't learn." A more familiar scenario is one where the students' contributions are not equal, or as another lecturer put it, "one person doing all the work and other students getting the benefit." Wurdinger and Allison (2017) encountered this issue in their survey, which they portrayed as "not collaborative learning, but a common misrepresentation of the technique" (p. 36).

Inevitably, students do not get as much out of activities if they will not collaborate, and this in turn reduces the benefits of debriefs and reflective stages. Ninety-two percent of faculty academics in Wurdinger and Allison's survey said that critical thinking is enhanced through experiential learning – the highest percentage, closely followed by problem solving and communication skills (2017, p. 34). Reflection enables students to deepen their understanding, retain learning and develop thinking skills. But to have meaningful reflection through an

experiential approach, they first need a contextualised, authentic activity (Herrington, 2006). This means that without communicative collaboration during activities, their skills development in other parts of the course will also be affected. As one of the participants remarked in their interview, "How do you do the debrief, if they don't participate?"

In this study, I have presented and discussed both quantitative and qualitative data drawn from a project on the use of experiential activities by 18 lecturers at OP. While the sample size does not allow for generalisations, this research has enabled key concepts of experiential learning to be explored. Of particular significance were findings relating to authenticity and student interaction, where a lack of effective and naturalistic communication between students can have a serious impact on their development. Or to put it simply, there is a lot more to experiential learning than work-related activities.

Bruno Balducci joined the Otago Polytechnic Learning and Teaching Development team in August 2021. He supports staff to design, develop and deliver face-to-face, blended and online courses. Prior to this, he worked as a training and development manager, a curriculum developer, a teacher trainer and a lecturer. He holds a research MA in English/French translation from the University of Leeds, a Cambridge ESOL Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA) and a Postgraduate Certificate in Further Education (PGCE) from the University of Huddersfield. His current research interests include authentic learner activities and student internships.

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