Implementing Experiential Learning to Improve Critical Thinking

Problem Statement

Pedagogical research over the past couple of decades has emphasized the use of active learning strategies to achieve higher levels of learning (Critical Thinking). Traditional lecture methods have been shown to often lead to passive learning and rote memorization. Retention of learning and critical thinking are enhanced by teaching strategies that seek to engage students in and out of the classroom (Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Totten, Sills, Digby & Russ, 1991).

Several approaches have been suggested in the literature to help motivate students to think critically, and one such approach is Experiential Learning (Gentry, J.W., 1990). According to AACSB’s Curriculum Development Series Report (2015),

“Experiential learning is an increasingly important pedagogy for business school programs as deans, faculty, and executives increasingly recognize that critical aspects of managing and leading are learned most effectively through practice rather than through traditional classroom-based pedagogies.”

The AACSB Task Force defined applied experiential learning as

“A business curriculum-related endeavor which is interactive (other than between teacher and pupil) and is characterized by variability and uncertainty.”

Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning involves four elements – active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation and abstract conceptualization. This flips the sequence of learning in traditional lectures, which generally focus on abstract conceptualization first, and then requires students to reflect and try to apply the concepts to exercises.

The key problem we address in this proposal is the lack of direct experiential context to learning that is true of many of the undergraduate courses in business. Providing students with a concrete context relevant to the subject matter being taught in a course can enhance their motivation as well as their ability to think critically about the lessons.

Proposal Objectives

The following are the key objectives of this study:

1. To implement elements of experiential learning in a core business class at RCB.
2. To demonstrate that experiential learning does in fact enhance student learning and critical thinking ability.

Methodology

Based on the topics taught in the course, we (the instructors) will identify a list of local businesses that are suitable for student engagement. A quick survey of students’ business interest will be used to match students with businesses, in small groups (one group to one business).
For example, to teach the topic of forecasting, a group of students with an interest in the coffee industry may be assigned to Starbucks or other coffee shops. They will be tasked with interviewing and interacting with managers from the business assigned, to explore the problem context of the forecasting activity in that business. Students will document and bring to the classroom their varied experiences from the different businesses that they interact with. Businesses will be chosen from different industries to create a rich variation. Formal teaching of a topic will begin in the classroom with a discussion of their experiences, followed by a Guided Problem Based Learning (Guided PBL) approach (Reference withheld to maintain anonymity of the authors). Students will work on forecasting problems in class, informed by their experience, after which instructors will guide them towards understanding the theoretical framework for forecasting.

Similarly, this idea can be applied to other topics as well. Given the time limitations of a semester, not all topics discussed in class may be covered by the experience that students gain through their interactions with businesses. However, every business course will have some elements that will fit this method.

**Evaluation**

In a previous study, we tested the impact of the Guided PBL approach on learning compared to traditional methods. Here, we build on that with the Experiential Learning component added to create a context for student learning.

1. We will test critical thinking ability among students with and without Experiential Learning. At least one section of a core class will be taught without this method, and one with.
2. A survey will be conducted to measure student perceptions of improvement in their critical thinking ability in all the sections.

Data will be collected and analyzed to test for significant improvement in students’ critical thinking abilities, as well as their perceptions regarding their abilities. Pairwise Means tests will be performed to test for significance.

As mentioned earlier, this idea is applicable to any business course to some extent. We will experiment with this idea in one course for focused topics and focused experiences. However, on a larger scale, experiential learning can involve immersion in a business, and the use of that context across multiple courses.

**Funding/Equipment**

No special equipment is needed for this study. The only requirement is time, so we ask for a summer course release to conduct the study. Both authors are IRB certified.

**References**

