Student Learning as a Result of Experiential Education

By Diana Mowen & Amy Harder

It has long been accepted that student learning is inherently related to the type of instruction students receive. Therefore, an important item for consideration by any teacher is how his/her teaching style affects the learner. Some instructional methods are particularly focused on the learner (i.e. learner-centered approaches), while others focus more on the teacher. In agricultural education, the experiential learning model is a natural fit for teachers looking to incorporate a learner-centered approach into the classroom.

History of Experiential Learning

The first concepts of experiential learning were developed in the early 20th century by the renowned educational philosopher John Dewey. Since that time, Dewey's ideas have been molded and refined. In 1984, David Kolb proposed the Experiential Learning Model for adult education, a four step cycle. The four steps are:

1. Concrete experience,
2. Observations and reflection,
3. Formation of abstract concepts and generalization, and

Kolb suggests that learning is a cyclical process, which is not complete without the learner participating in all four steps. Kolb's model was adopted/adapted by the National 4-H program as a framework for youth development programming. The 4-H adaptation breaks Kolb's four-step cycle into five, placing greater emphasis on the separate actions of sharing and processing (see Figure 1). Neglecting the process of reflection as a major activity has been a criticism of Kolb's original model (Smith, 2005). As agricultural education is closely aligned with the youth development mission of 4-H, suggestions for incorporating experiential learning into the classroom are offered.

Why Use Experiential Learning?

At the mention of experiential learning, some of the first things that come to mind are the difficulties associated with incorporating it into the classroom. Often the experiential learning approach results in a less orderly classroom. This can cause discomfort for teachers who may be used to maintaining a more structured classroom environment. Too, the preparation time for experiential experiences is greater than for traditional lecture/discussion lessons; similarly, the processing time for students is longer. This results in more time being spent on less material. Teachers also must engage more patience with students' explorations and take a facilitator role rather than a teacher role.

While these aspects of experiential learning may take some effort to get used to, the benefits are extraordinary. Allowing students to explore new experiences engages multiple senses which can help increase retention. Multiple teaching methods are integrated and the focus of lessons becomes child-centered rather than subject matter centered. Students will build confidence and competence during their explorations and become engaged with the subject matter through activities that are both fun and educational.

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What careers should agricultural education be focused upon? How does a teacher of agriculture, at any level, prepare students for the selected careers? What steps are incurred in developing students for their chosen careers? How does the teacher involve the community and connect to the community in the preparation of students for various agricultural careers?

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Figure 1: 4-H adaptation of Kolb Model (Maxa, Baker, Cahill, Choski, & Dennis, 2005)
ested will also decrease discipline problems once routines have been established for engaging in the concrete experiences.

Applying the Experiential Learning Model to Agricultural Education

The benefits of experiential learning are attractive, and there are many ways that teachers can incorporate them into established agricultural education programs. When incorporating experiential learning opportunities into the scope and sequence of an agricultural education course, it is important to keep in mind that just allowing students to experience something does not qualify. The experience must be followed up with sharing, processing, generalization, and application. The experiential learning model can be applied to existing units of instruction with a little modification. Many units begin with basic vocabulary and introductory principles and end with some sort of culminating activity prior to an exam. Utilizing the experiential learning model means allowing the students to participate in the culminating activity first, and then covering items such as vocabulary and principles through a facilitated process of sharing, processing, and generalization. At that time, students may apply the principles by demonstrating them in new situations.

There are many different types of experiences that can serve as the catalyst for this model. Teachers may design a lab experiment or demonstration for the students. A structured shop activity may serve as a concrete experience. The idea is for students to be involved in something that sparks a question in them and leads to an interest in finding the answer.

Following the experience, students need an opportunity to reflect on the event. However, it is important for the students to first share their impressions publicly. An open discussion in the classroom will allow students to share their points of view and better internalize what they experienced as well as picking up on things they may have missed through the observations of their classmates. After discussing, students should be guided into the processing/reflection phase. Students may complete a journal or prepare a report about their observations. Activities should be introduced to help students analyze the experience. This is the appropriate point for teachers to present classroom material that involves the concepts involved in the experience.

After breaking down the experience and analyzing its parts, students can then begin to put those parts back together in ways that demonstrate application to other experiences. Finally, students may work individually or in groups to complete application projects relating to the material covered. Student presentations are a great way to allow students to demonstrate their applications of knowledge stemming from the concrete experience and observe those of their classmates.

While implementing experiential learning activities into the classroom takes effort and patience, once routines and expectations have been established, students will benefit from increased motivation, knowledge, retention, and developed life skills. If every class taught included even one unit utilizing the experiential learning model, teachers would see positive changes in student engagement. The effort of planning an experience and facilitating the students’ progress through the five steps will result in beneficial classroom experience for both students and teachers. Try it. You’ll like it!

References


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