

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: INQUIRY DEPTH AND BREADTH OF OTHER- VERSUS SELF-DRIVEN MODELS

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### ABSTRACT

Within the experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984) two primary modes of learning can be identified: other-directed and self-directed learning. Other-directed learning occurs by absorbing and elaborating on thoughts conveyed by others. To contrast, the self-directed approach to learning is more exploratory in nature. Here, knowledge develops through the process of personal episodes, during which people develop ideas grounded in their observations. Providing learning experiences that are partly self-directed and partly other-directed is being viewed as beneficial and even necessary (Dewey 1997).

In this exploratory study, the authors seek to examine whether the breadth and depth of student inquiries vary depending on the mode of learning. The authors evaluate student learning that results from working on an experiential assignment in the Consumer Behavior course. The assignment involves the linking of theory and data by having student teams statistically analyze data on consumer spending behaviors. The more specific objective was to have students learn how consumer values and demographic characteristics are related to spending behaviors. The assignment includes analyses questions that motivate other-directed learning. The assignment also includes a more open-ended challenge that motivates self-directed learning.

The other-directed set of analysis instructions entailed, as per the Experiential Learning model, the professor starting by presenting abstract concepts and generalizations, and a definition of values. Students were given several arguments about how values may affect consumption, and hence spending. To move students to the next level of the experiential learning process, students were then instructed to empirically assess the links between values and spending using actual survey data. Students were told to use regression analysis at a minimum, but were allowed to use any additional analysis desired. Finally, to move students to the stage of reflection, students were instructed to write a brief summary report that conveyed insights and conclusions based on their analysis.

The self-directed set of analysis instructions simply entailed asking students to evaluate the survey data,

and try to understand how consumer variables relate to spending. Students were advised to reflect on their own experiences, form generalized ideas, and then write a brief summary report that conveyed insights and conclusions based on their analysis.

The results provide evidence that self-directed approaches to learning results in more holistic in-depth interpretations. The concrete experiences preceding the analysis perhaps lead to more detailed reflective observations. To contrast, other-directed approaches to learning seem to be reduced to a more technical and superficial analysis. Here, the reflective observations are at a minimum. However, since this mode of learning is induced by the instructor, he or she has the opportunity to include a greater breadth of subject matters. Interestingly, none of the two modes of learning reaches the ideal learning goals of large breadth as well as depth.

Some initial recommendations include: (1) When using self-directed assignments, the authors recommend having at least two separate submissions. The professor can scan for overly narrow analysis and can suggest further analysis to enhance the breadth for a second submission. (2) When using an other-directed approach, find early stopping points to prod students to think about and suggest a variety of ideas. The goal of this open-ended prodding is to enable the other-directed learning to gain depth in inquiry. (3) If a class largely contains self-directed learning experiences, emphasize some cumulative knowledge testing (e.g., in exams or papers). This recommended tactic encourages more breadth in thoughts, so the natural tendency of narrow inquiry is combated.

### REFERENCES

- Dewey, John. 1997. *Experience and education*. New York: Free Press, reprint from 1938.
- Kolb, David A. 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.