

ICED 2020 proceedings:

Workshop: Experiential learning for future ready teaching

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Abstract

Amongst the many proven truths emerging during 2020 is the certain uncertainty about the future. Before Covid-19, the rise of automation across all industries and disciplines saw an increased demand for skill sets in graduates that enabled emerging employees to traverse the unknown, preparing them to be competitive in a job market with an unseen landscape. The global pandemic has accelerated the interest in these skills, and educators need to ensure that attention remains on the development of these skills. This skill curriculum need not compete with discipline-specific skills education, but rather sit alongside it to compliment the development of soft skill competencies using teaching methodologies that can be adapted and curated according to even the most specific industry needs.

For a future world (where 85% of jobs in 2030 do not yet exist), the need for cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, creativity, innovation and complex problem solving is expected to increase. Experiential learning systems allow the exploration of these skills, and the hands-on, minds-on nature of this type of learning ensures that students are ready for real-world application sooner. This workshop invites participants to engage in some of these teaching methodologies, and explores not only the activities, but the follow-up reflection work which embeds student learning into long term acquisition of knowledge.

1 Introduction

This workshop will use three hands-on, experiential learning activities, after which a reflection will be performed to deepen learning engagement. As adult learners we learn by doing, and participation in the workshop will facilitate insightful understanding of the potential for experiential learning as a future facing teaching tool. It also provides educators with the opportunity to empathise with students' experiences and understand common challenges and the resulting learning outcomes. Reflection is a key element of experiential learning, as it provides students with the opportunity to become aware of their own metacognitive processes, and to challenge and interrogate their assumptions, beliefs and thought patterns during their learning experiences.

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2 Workshop description

Each workshop is a stand-alone exercise that can be used in a wide variety of scenarios, and with different numbers of participants. As the workshop will involve a significant amount of participant interaction, it is prudent to use an icebreaker activity that builds and establishes trust amongst the participants sufficient to the context, paving the way for easy and open communication.

2.1 PMI in practice

The PMI technique (developed by Edward de Bono) and explored in his text *Thinking Course: Powerful Tools to Transform Your Thinking* is a thinking technique which challenges our tendency to go with our first opinion, or as De Bono suggests, “when we have no doubt about the situation but have instantly decided.” This exercise encourages the user to pause, reflect and find the Plus Points, Minus Points, and Interesting Points about the issue at hand, thus helping students to reach beyond their initial thoughts and develop their ideas further.

Divided into groups of 2 or 3, workshop participants apply PMI thinking to a series of cards with questions and record their findings on post-its. This exercise allows them to engage in divergent thinking from the outset, paving the way for rich creative thinking in subsequent tasks. A second learning intervention happens when participants are encouraged to find ways to flip their initial responses, finding a home for the minus idea in the positive space and vice versa.

Following the activity students are asked to reflect on their experience in their groups, paying particular attention to going beyond their “first thoughts” – Was this a challenge and why? What was holding them back from thinking further? If they were to try this exercise again, what would they do differently? How can this type of thinking be used in real world situations?

While the PMI method is relatively simple, it takes on a high level of application and success when the facilitator has the capacity to employ a divergent mindset and make a critical deep dive on the selected subject.

This exercise encourages the development of a number of key skills, including divergent thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication. Time: approx. 30 minutes.

2.2 Seeking shelter

In the Seeking Shelter activity, groups of three participants each are given two items: a *Star Trek* figurine, and a descriptor of an environment (rain forest, desert, coastline etc.). Each group is tasked with building a shelter for the figurine. However, within each group one person will be given a restriction on their communication, e.g. they cannot speak, cannot touch anything (including their fellow teammates), will be blindfolded or have to wear earplugs. The group must adapt their communication skills accordingly to collaborate within their group in ideating a shelter, facilitating the inclusion of all team members and also communicating their shelter idea to the facilitators.

The shelter must be built to scale for the figurine; no materials can be used or put in place if it is not expected that the figurine could reasonably move them; and it must be agreed that the shelter can withstand the conditions associated with the prescribed environment, including climate and wildlife. This assessment takes place among the entire group, with questions as to the security and stability of the shelter being posed by the facilitators and the other teams.

The reflection exercise following this activity will ask participants to think about the communication challenges they faced during the exercise, and their own responses to them.

Particular attention must be paid to any blindfolded participants, as they are often neglected in favour of achieving the goal of building the shelter.

Skills developed: Communication, inclusion & diversity, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, problem-solving. Time: approx. 30 minutes.

2.3 Shapes: Drawing exercise

Participants are divided into groups of two or three. One participant per group is given a predesigned image made up of shapes and lines of various sizes, positions and opacity. This participant has the role of describer and is the only member who can see the image. They must communicate the image to their teammates, who then draw the image based on the description with the aim of achieving mimetic accuracy.

During this process the participants must communicate a range of elements to achieve their goal, referencing a number of specific elements. These include, but are not limited to, orientation, landscape or portrait, and related positioning of elements. The challenge is how to communicate proportionality or reference shape type in organic or biomorphic terms as opposed to the more familiar geometric.

The reflection exercise following this activity will ask participants to think about the collaboration challenges they faced during the exercise, and their own responses to them. Assumption, frustration and irritation are key disruptors in the path to success in this activity. All impact the participants' capacity to reason and reflect in the moment so as to better perform their task.

The task draws on participants' leadership skills, communication skills, collaboration and teamwork skills. Time: approx. 30 minutes.

3 Reflections

During the reflection stage, participants are given the opportunity to unpack their process while comparing the results of their efforts. At this point, participants are encouraged, for example, to identify avenues for improvement in their problem-solving process and outcome; to engage with the feelings they experienced during the process; and explore how these impacted their thinking. Participants are asked to objectively describe the task instructions and determine how they interpreted, followed and evolved in their application of the minimalist instructions.

A final reflection task will ask participants to consider how these types of workshop activity could be facilitated within their own education, learning or training institutions.

4 Conclusions

We hope that this workshop description will provide some inspiration for skill development endeavours for future-ready students and graduates. Covid-19 has expedited trends in education and employment that we expected to see, and so while the future remains laden with uncertainty, the demand for core soft skills and agile and adaptable learners remains constant or is increasing. We encourage you to explore the opportunities for future-proofing students and learners with empathy, insight and enthusiasm to help them build resilience and remain enthusiastic on their journeys ahead.

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