FALL 1983

Journal OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNSHIPS

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Idea Notebook

PRACTICAL EVALUATION FOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

by Judith Kleinfeld

Evaluations of experiential education programs typically take one of two roads. There is the high road -- formal, scientific evaluation with experimental groups, comparison groups, pre-tests, and multiple measures. There is the low road -- questionnaires asking program participants what they liked and didn't like about the program activities, staff, special speakers, session lengths, and so forth.

In practice, few programs carry out formal scientific evaluations. They are too expensive in program funds and staff time. Questionnaire evaluations are common. But most program staff, with little training in research methods, draft questionnaires which yield little useful information.

We developed an education-based evaluation strategy for the Alaska Department of Education to use in evaluating a group of experiential education programs the Department operated. A variety of programs were included, most funded by the state legislature under the general rubric of "leadership development." Our strategy was to design an easy-to-use, inexpensive way of finding out whether students are actually learning from an experiential program or just having a good time. Most important, this evaluation method would add to, rather than steal time from, the educational experience. We wanted to help students think about what they should be learning from the program before the experience begins, and to help them reflect upon what they have gotten out of the program when the experience concluded.

The most popular program we looked at, Alaska Close-Up, gives high school students a first-hand look at state government operations. The program is designed to increase students' understanding of and participation in public affairs. Modeled on the national Close-Up program, the Alaska Close-Up program brings high school students and teachers to the state capital, Juneau. Students observe legislative sessions, hear agency and other speakers, meet their state legislators, and sometimes testify before legislative committees. Students also participate in simulation games, such as "log-rolling" where they enact the roles of legislators attempting to pass bills of importance to their constituents.

Another example is the Rural Student Vocational Program, designed to provide work experience for Eskimo and Indian students from isolated villages. Students who grow up in these villages see few jobs other than schoolteacher, doctor, health aide, secretary, fire-fighter, and construction worker. The Program brings them to an Alaska city for two weeks and places them in a job. Students spend regular working hours at the job site observing the occupational routines and helping with the work. They receive a stipend of $100 to simulate a paycheck.

Despite the popularity of the programs, we questioned how much education was taking place. First, students were not prepared for the expensive experience they were having. The Eskimo and Indian high school students traveling to the cities for work experience, for example, usually learned little about how the workplace was organized and what they could expect to do on a job before the experience began. We sus-

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Editor's Note: In response to the often expressed need for experiential educators to document what they are doing, this is the first in a series of articles explaining practical research ideas.

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pected that many floated through the experience without learning, for example, how supervisors communicated work demands and expectations, how one part of a business affected another part, or what characteristics led to job success.

Second, most programs had few follow-up activities to help students reflect upon what they had experienced and make sense of it. We suspected, for example, that Alaska Close-Up students, exposed to a few exciting days of speeches from legislative aides and talks with state senators about how important their participation in government was, came away with a Pollyanna-ish view of how state government operated.

Talking with program directors about these matters, however, was unproductive. The usual response was defensiveness. Whatever the evaluation strategy we developed, it was critical that program staff believe the results. Program staff would be most likely to believe the results, we felt, if they did the evaluation themselves. Also, an outside evaluation would only apply to the particular year the evaluation was done. An on-going evaluation effort, done routinely by staff, would be far more useful.

Most of the experiential programs we studied already did conduct their own internal evaluations. Typically they used questionnaires. Alaska Close-Up, for example, asked students to rate on a one to five scale various program activities -- the speakers they heard, the luncheon with their elected representative, program staff, and so forth.

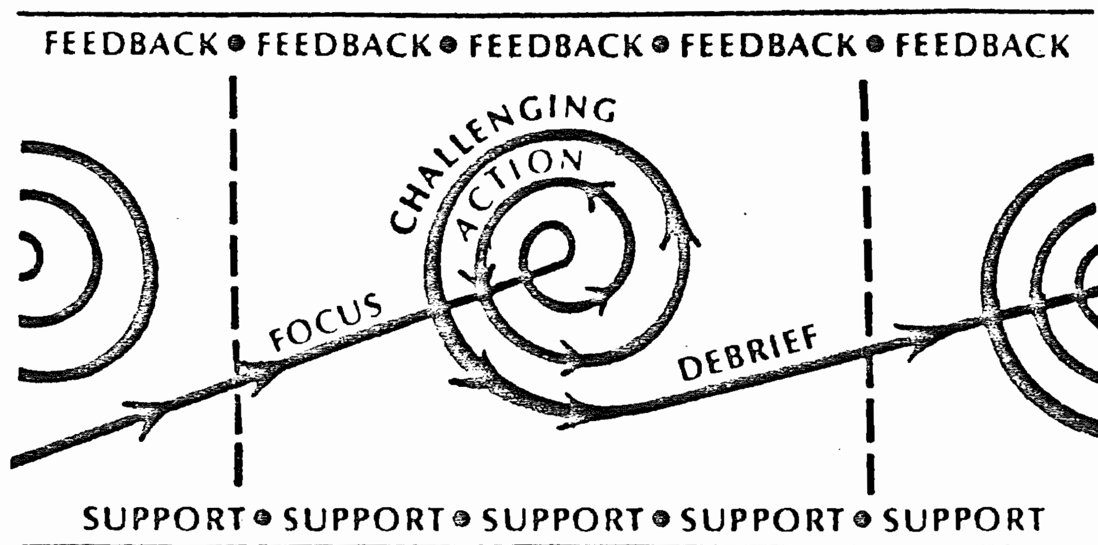
These questionnaires told the program staff which events students liked. They did not tell the program staff what students had learned. Giving such a questionnaire to evaluate an experiential program was like giving an English test that asks students to rate on a one to five scale how much they had learned about punctuation.

Conrad and Hedin's study (1982) of the effects of experiential learning programs indeed found that whether students rated a program highly had little to do with how much they had gained from the program as measured by objective tests. Students rated programs highly when they felt the experience was "interesting" and when they were "appreciated for their work." Students learned from the program primarily when they did things rather than just observing them and when they had a chance to reflect upon and discuss the experience.

Education-Based Evaluation

Our alternative approach to evaluation was based on prevailing theories of how people learn from experience. Educators in the field emphasize that a program must do more than provide students with a rich experience. The program must also help students think about the experience and figure out what it meant. As Joplin puts it, "Experience alone is insufficient to be called experiential education, and it is the reflection process which turns experience into experiential education." (1981:17)

Joplin has proposed a particularly useful model of the stages of effective experiential education:



The model has three stages:

1. **Focus.** Program staff must clearly define what students can learn through the program experience and direct students' attention to it.

2. **Action.** The essence of experiential education is direct experience and participation.

3. **Debrief.** Students identify and discuss what they learn. In this stage, they form concepts and make generalizations which they can test in new situations.

The evaluation strategy which we proposed was to link these stages of experiential education to evaluation activities. Specifically:

1. Focus Stage Combined with Evaluation Pre-test:

Program directors use focusing activities to direct students' attention to what they should be learning from the program. The focusing activity doubles as a pre-test of what students already know about the area.

2. Debrief Stage Combined with Evaluation Post-tests:

Program directors use debriefing activities to help students think about what they have learned. The debriefing activity doubles as a post test.

We will illustrate how a program director could use this approach to evaluate Alaska Close-Up. When students first get together in the capital of Juneau, they would be asked to do a written simulation game such as the following activity:

EXAMPLE OF CLOSE-UP EVALUATION

(Students receive a copy of a pending bill with a list of arguments for and against the bill.)

1. Decide whether you are for or against this bill. Suppose you want to tell legislators what you think. However, you are at home and you don't want to spend more than half an hour and $5.00 on this project.

   a. Name as many different ways to communicate your views as you can. Be specific. (Don't just say "send a letter." To whom would you send a letter? What other ways could you use to send a message?)

   b. What do you think happens to these kinds of communications?

   c. How much influence do you think your communication will have?
   ☐ a lot ☐ some ☐ not much ☐ none at all

2. Suppose this bill is very important to you. You are willing to spend several days and several hundred dollars to get the bill passed or defeated.

   a. What kinds of actions would you take? (Name as many as possible and be specific.)

   b. How much influence do you think you will have?
   ☐ a lot ☐ some ☐ not much ☐ none at all

After the Close-Up experience, students would be asked this set (or a parallel set) of questions again. Afterwards, the students would discuss their answers and the general issues as a group.

Program staff could, of course, use the pre-test and post-test answers as a way of finding out whether students had actually learned what staff thought they had learned. Any experienced teacher knows that reading over such answers is embarrassingly informative about the success of instruction.

This education-based strategy is not a substitute for a formal evaluation. It might not convince skeptical legislators, for example, of the wisdom of funding experiential programs. What it can accomplish is to inform program staff of what students have actually learned from their efforts. And this is worth doing.

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I would like to express my appreciation to the Alaska Department of Education for funding this research and to Denise Daniello, Lois Stiegemeier, and G. Williamson McDiarmid for their help with it.