

Learning to Leap: Using Experiential Education and Collaborative Learning to Enhance Student Perceptions of Self-Confidence in the First-Year Seminar

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This article describes the effect of participation in experiential activities in a first-year seminar on students' perceptions of self-esteem and academic performance in their first semester at Kennesaw State University. Findings suggest that student participants had greater levels of self-esteem and achieved higher grade point averages than their peers who were in first-year seminars that were not experientially oriented. The article concludes with strategies for instructors to use to purposefully incorporate experiential learning into a first-year seminar.

Introduction

Although active learning has become a hallmark of first-year seminar instruction (Hunter & Linder, 2005), the emphasis is often on either short exercises that help students get to know each other or activities that introduce a concept. While these forms of active teaching and learning can contribute to the first-year seminar classroom, experiential and collaborative learning can result in deeper, more meaningful learning and engagement (Donahue, 2004; Gross Davis, 2009; Mixson-Brookshire, 2012). Experiential education actively engages the individual with the environment (Beard & Wilson, 2006) in a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). For instructors and practitioners, this type of engagement can occur when the classroom or out-of-class environment has been designed to involve students

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actively in their own learning, encouraging both growth and self-discovery.

The current study investigated the effect participation in experiential exercises embedded in a first-year seminar had on students' perceptions of self-esteem and academic performance in their first semester at Kennesaw State University. Student participants were enrolled in sections of the seminar that incorporated learning by engaging the student in hands-on activities (e.g., Traffic Jam, Mine Field, Warp Speed, Blind Trust, and Communication Puzzle) that involved inquiry and analysis, problem solving, communication, decision making, team work, and trust. Experiential learning was also extended beyond the classroom boundaries by involving student participants in low and high ropes challenge courses. The goal of these activities was two-fold—to help students develop skills that could be applied immediately to help them navigate transition to and through the college experience and gain confidence in their ability to be successful at Kennesaw State University.

Methodology

The study involved students enrolled in the first-year seminar, KSU 1101, at Kennesaw State University. KSU 1101 is a three-credit hour letter-graded academic seminar with learning outcomes associated with the following: life skills, strategies for academic success, campus and community connections, and foundations for global learning. Students in sections of the course with experiential education embedded and students in sections that were taught using traditional methods (e.g., lecture, discussion, and class activities) were invited to participate in the study. A total of 125 students participated, including 50 from experiential sections (these classes incorporated experiential activities during each class meeting), 50 from traditional sections, and 25 students from “mixed” sections that combined both experiential and traditional instructional methods. Student participants in both types of seminars were asked to complete three instruments: the Personal Report on Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (McCroskey, 1982), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and a brief demographic survey. Additionally, individual class grades and semester grade point averages for the first semester were collected and analyzed.

Results and Anecdotal Findings

While there were myriad data collected, the following results are most relevant to the current study. When asked if they were able to do things as well as most, 97.6 % of student participants in the first-year seminar either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement compared to students in traditional seminars, 85.2% of whom either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. In addition to increased perceptions of self-esteem, student participants in the experiential sections of the course earned higher grade point averages than their peers, and 16.3 % received a 4.0 semester GPA in their first semester compared to 10.7 % of the

students in the traditional sections of the first-year seminar.

In addition to the aforementioned results, there are also anecdotal findings that will be explored in future iterations of this study. Through incorporating experiences and activities that reinforced the curriculum in the course, there was an observable change in students' responsiveness and attentiveness. Students in the experiential seminars appeared to be engaged with the curriculum and with each other on a deeper level, which was reflected in the individual grades in the seminar and the overall class average compared to non-experiential sections of the seminar. Students' increased confidence in their academic and communication skills was also observable by the instructors teaching the course, both in the class activities and in the experiential learning that occurred on the ropes challenge courses.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The nascent findings of this study demonstrate the effect participation in experiential learning activities that foster challenge and support, as well as failure and success, can have on students' perceptions of self-esteem and academic performance in the early college experience. It is through these learning experiences that students can develop or enhance existing life skills while learning to embrace personal strengths and weaknesses. Because the experiential activities required students to work collaboratively, they witnessed the team process and synergy that can occur when teams perform successfully. Conversely, the student participants also experienced disappointment when teams failed to function or complete an assigned task. These hands-on lessons provide context for many of the concepts in the first-year seminar, including time management, communication, and leadership skills.

Although student perceptions appear to be positively affected by participation in the first-year seminar sections with embedded experiential activities, there were challenges for the instructors of these sections. The following are strategies based on the "lessons learned" through this experience:

- 1) **Develop learning outcomes.** The following are all potential areas for learning outcomes: academic/cognitive or critical thinking skill development, fostering connections with peers, engaging students out-of-class, creating opportunities for teamwork, improving verbal and nonverbal communication, establishing goals, and developing global perspectives.
- 2) **Carefully choose your activities.** The experiential activities should complement the course content and help achieve the stated learning outcomes.
- 3) **Create a checklist.** Items on the checklist may include the following questions: What goals do you want to accomplish through this activity? How might I adapt/change the activity to serve my purpose? What supplies are needed? Have I allowed enough time to set up this activity and ensure my students understand why and how the activity will be

conducted? Have I included enough time for reflection (post-activity or exercise)? Am I prepared for students who are unable to accomplish or achieve the stated learning outcomes or goals?

- 4) **Allow time for reflection (both for the students and for you).** Reflection is an important aspect of experiential learning. Often, instructors and practitioners launch into an activity with a proposed outcome, and the student's outcome is vastly different. Allow time for discussion after each activity. The following questions may be used to prompt students to reflect and make meaning of their experience: What was it like for you as a participant to solve this problem or to engage in this activity? How did you get the perspective necessary to solve the problem or meet the goal? Did you notice any disengaged participants? How did you reach the goal or solve the problem? What did you do to solve it? Who played key roles in solving the problem or reaching the goal? Was there effective communication within the group? Did you have a leader? Was one needed? How did you distribute participant support and responsibility? What was your role in the process? How did the group sort through various suggestions that were made?
- 5) **Anticipate the challenges.** Challenges are part of the experiential education experience for the instructors and practitioners who are facilitating those experiences. Anticipating the challenges is one way to be prepared before they arise. For example, consider the following: How can you overcome natural tendencies of people to compete rather than cooperate? How much outside information or perspective do you need to reach a goal or solve a problem? With constraints such as time, penalties, grades, and goals, are you able to achieve effective communication and engage all parties?

The most significant challenge in the current study involved overcoming the students' tendencies to compete with each other. As a result of this, the instructors in the study decided to revise their personal strategy, which included not telling the student participants what other classes or students accomplished or how they approached the activity. Rather, the instructors asked students involved in the activity set their own strategy as part of the exercise, which resulted in the students determining how much time was needed to complete the task, the approach they would take, how they would communicate, and whether or not they would assign a leader. Following this change, the instructors saw students develop new cooperation skills, which allowed them to focus on the task rather than concerning themselves with what others were doing or had done with a similar exercise.

Conclusion

Experiential learning provides an interactive method for addressing transition issues faced by first-year college students, while promoting self-confidence and engagement through group interaction. Engaged students not only enhance their skills, but they learn about themselves and each other through the process.

Although the current study involved students in KSU 1101 at Kennesaw State University, the types of experiential exercises and the ways in which they were used can be applied to other first-year seminars, orientation, transition, and retention programs. Many orientation programs incorporate experiential learning into orientation leader training to develop team cohesion, and some orientation programs provide incoming students with similar opportunities. Experiential learning in the first-year seminar provides instructors and practitioners with ways to prompt students to communicate and engage in meaningful ways in teams, both in and out of the classroom. Furthermore, because trust is a foundational aspect of many experiential learning exercises, including those in this study, students must develop relationships that allow them to trust their peers in their team. It is through these interactions and experiences that students begin to develop their own confidence to leap into the college experience.

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