


Next Practice

from Imagination Lab

Ensuring greater practical value for experiential learning

Dr. Peter Bürgi



To be more effective, experiential learning needs to integrate business realities into the experience.

Many experiential learning approaches currently used in organizations risk being distant from organizational life and having, as a result, less practical value. They may trigger rich emotional responses, and feature unusual or startling experiences at the “gut level,” but they may lose effectiveness by failing to connect at the “head level” with participants’ knowledge of organizational life. The steps used to integrate a rich experience with business reality, moreover, can sometimes highlight a gap between activity and application. But, as research conducted at the Imagination Lab suggests, experiential learning can avoid such dangers when the activities are *constructive, collective, and realistic*.

Experiential learning often depends on a debrief to help participants make sense of what they just experienced. Reviewing with their facilitator or instructor what they did, and then identifying how their activities pertain to their work, participants are expected, and in fact must do their best, to knit together their simulated experience with organizational realities. Often, the further the experience has been from daily business life, the more such a debrief may appear artificial.

The technique called LEGO® Serious Play™ (LSP) helps strengthen the best aspects of experiential learning by reducing the gap between experiential activity and business reality. In LSP sessions, participants use LEGO® materials to construct models that express and visualise abstract issues, so that these issues become concrete and immediate. A sequence of activities, beginning with individual “warm-up” exercises, leads to groups building models collectively, and

engaging in rich discussions of the ideas that emerge from these models. The groups do not concentrate on generic or theoretical topics, but focus tightly on the here-and-now reality of their own organization.

Building, Communicating, and Learning

In the right hands, LSP is a process that truly brings the three attributes *constructive, collective, and realistic* to the heart of effective experiential learning.

Constructive: A central feature of LSP seminars is the construction of models of specific issues or ideas. This is a direct application of the theory of learning called “constructionism,” developed by Seymour Papert from the work of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. Papert’s basic idea is that when we construct things out in the world, we simultaneously construct theories and knowledge in our minds. Thus, *learning favors concrete thinking over abstract thought*.

	Traditional Experiential Learning	More Effective Experiential Learning
Situating the Learning	Experience and learning are separated	Learning is built into the experience
Focus of Experience	Individual	Collective
Proximity to Business Issues	Outside organizational life	Integrates actual business issues

More Effective Experiential Learning

Collective: LSP also involves group building activities, in which participants exchange ideas or interpretations through their constructions. In these collectively built models, individuals’ tacit ideas or thoughts become explicit, and previously unstated assumptions become available for evaluation. Beyond the individual knowledge-building, therefore, LSP seminars also enrich communication within a group and help establish a shared collective understanding of abstract issues.

Let's look at two examples of LSP in practice.

Experiential Teamwork

A Fortune 500 technology firm wanted to prepare people in a key functional department to become internal change agents. During an LSP seminar, participants from the department built a model of their current role inside the organization, illustrating both its strengths and weaknesses. They next collectively constructed a new model showing their own role once the upcoming change program was launched, as well as the changes they would bring about in the wider organization. In doing so, they found it easy to visualise and understand the implications of the task they faced. The experience of co-constructing their new roles allowed them to collectively integrate knowledge of their new role with an understanding of how it would be applied.

Realistic: LSP seminars are not generic or abstract: they always focus on an issue that is being acutely felt by the group assembled to work on it. Making sense of the kaleidoscopic perspectives inside an organization as it faces a challenge often requires the intensive but grounded interaction that occurs in these sessions. It is actually highly meaningful, as a result, for the group to engage in the interpretive model-building and discussion which LSP sessions stage. Thus, focusing on highly relevant issues engages participants directly in the reality of their organizational life.

This example shows how the activity of constructing models actually generates and consolidates knowledge of abstract issues, so that they become more comprehensible. It also illustrates that collective activities help create shared understanding in a group. At the same time, though, it reinforces the importance of working with "natural constituencies," or the set of individuals for whom the issue at hand is a common and vital concern: mixing in other individuals, or failing to include all the relevant ones, detracts sharply from the quality of the work and practicality of the experience.

Finally, the example shows that the exercises used were tightly connected to the business challenges participants routinely face. The discussions among participants in these exercises are not tangential to the reality of their organizational life – they are directly about it. Thus, instead of trying to behave like a team in circumstances other than work, department members *behaved like a team at work* – collectively analyzing their current position and the implications of the new role they were about to assume. As a result, the learning activities and the needs of the organization merged smoothly into one experience – or in other words, the link between the "gut" and the "head" was built into the experience.

Experiential Strategy

A cross-functional group of managers at the Southeast Asia subsidiary of a major European firm was preparing to roll out an innovative internal program among their 2000 colleagues. Their biggest challenge: while the CEO supported their efforts, they suspected that other top managers were quietly opposing them. The group used an LSP seminar to construct a model of their own team, and then built a thorough representation of the various elements in the organizational environment which supported, opposed, or were neutral to their program. Playing out a series of "what-if" scenarios in this landscape, they hammered out a set of guidelines they could use to help them negotiate potential pitfalls in the roll-out. With the experiential learning of the LSP seminar, they gained not only a panoramic overview of their situation, but also a tighter sense of teamwork, and a collective sense of preparedness to respond strategically to different challenges they might face.

Conclusion

Although experiential learning approaches have raised the quality of business education tremendously, their practical value can still be increased. We find that the convergence of three attributes – *constructive, collective, and realistic* – significantly improves this value by making debriefing an integral part of the activity, not a separate phase of the learning process. This form of experiential learning is more practical, makes for more shared communication, and uses a more natural learning cycle. "Capture their hearts and minds", it is often said. For good experiential learning, we say: "Hit them in the gut, but don't forget to connect with the mind." That's learning with practical take-home value.

The ideas in Next Practice represent the collective interests of the Imagination Lab Foundation research team. Contact Peter Bürgi (peter@imagilab.org) if you are interested in the topic of this issue.



Imagination Lab

Rue Marterrey 5
1005 Lausanne • Switzerland
Tel +41 21 321 5544 • Fax +41 21 321 5545
www.imagilab.org • info@imagilab.org

Established in 2000, Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research foundation that conducts research on play, imagination and emergence as it relates to life, primarily in organizations.

Editor: Johan Roos (johan@imagilab.org)