

Experiential Learning in the Large Classroom Using Performative Pedagogy

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Abstract

Experiential learning (EL) is widely believed to lead to enhanced student engagement. This form of learning, however, may be difficult to implement in the large class sizes so common today. This case study describes an initiative involving performative pedagogy using interdisciplinary teaching and learning in an undergraduate class of 150 students from a change management module in the School of Business and an ensemble performance module in the Music Department in an Irish University. The students utilized acting, music, dance, and role-play in a large enrolment setting. Postprogram surveys and focus group interviews of students found that students responded positively to the initiative. Students also rated the class as more engaging than other subjects in which they were registered. Reflective essays written by students showed evidence of deep reflection and learning and these formed the basis for our discussion of the implications of this approach for management education. Future research should examine the effects of performative learning on student performance in terminal examinations.

Keywords

experiential learning, large class, higher education, interdisciplinary, peer assessment, performative pedagogy, active vs. passive learning, engaged learning

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Introduction

Experiential learning (EL) is a popular topic of discussion in higher education. Knowles, in defining adult learning, focused firmly on experience as a central and core element of learning (Knowles et al., 1998). Dewey (1938) identified how experience is linked to learning influencing subsequent approaches to the field of education in research and in practice. Today, we take for granted approaches to the enablement of experience through internship, the recognition of prior learning, and other practice-based approaches that base their propositions on the early EL theories. More recently, Kolb has become the most prominent scholar in EL, due to his creation of a ubiquitous model that depicts an EL process. Kolb emphasizes that knowledge is “created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb & Boyatzis, 2000). Researchers credit EL with leading to significant outcomes such as enhanced student engagement in higher education. Such engagement can be an effective counterfoil to “creeping passivity” and the belief among students that they are not “intellectually responsible for themselves” (Cutler, 2007, p. 6).

Performative pedagogy embodies a form of EL that centers on students and their participation in decisions of content and process in the classroom (Redaelli, 2015). In the current case study, performative refers to the students’ use of performance—acting, music, dance, and role-play to explore and communicate the students’ ideas, arguments, or concepts. Another core aspect of our interpretation of performative is interdisciplinary dialogue, which is reflected in the work of Jogschies et al. (2018), “A performative teaching, learning, and research culture can emerge wherever an academic discipline enters into a constructive dialogue with the performing arts” (p. 52). Performative learning integrates active learning and collaborative learning in an activity-based setting. This form of learning however differs from traditional EL in the way it focuses on students and their participation. Performative learning is inherently democratic in the way that it de-emphasizes the role of “sage on the stage” of the lecturer—the one who is providing the knowledge to the students (Redaelli, 2015). While performing, the students are also engaged in an interaction with each other and the lecturer and so a shared responsibility for learning is created (Gleason, 1986). In this way a form of accountability arises in the group, as if a student is absent, they will diminish the experience for their peers in addition to losing the experience for themselves.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that EL is achievable with smaller class sizes but is more challenging in larger classes. Large classes are becoming more common in higher education and these larger numbers can pose difficulties for faculty wishing to deliver interesting, engaging, and effective

teaching and learning to students (Ferlie et al., 2010). With larger classes, challenging staff–student ratios may lead to students experiencing isolation and disengagement (Baldwin & Koh, 2012). These outcomes may result in relative disadvantage to the weaker students in the cohort (Carini et al., 2006). There is no accepted definition of a large class in higher education although studies in the area tend to focus on classes that are greater than 100 students (Maringe & Sing, 2014). Larger class sizes appear usually in undergraduate and introductory levels and in these situations the problems created by teaching large numbers of students are challenging (Marchant & Morgan, 2016). For the purposes of this article, we recognize the class selected for this case study as being large given that the numbers involved presented “both perceived and real challenges in the delivery of quality and equal learning opportunities” (Maringe & Sing, 2014, p. 763). The constraints offered by the size of this class led us to believe that we could achieve EL for students only in the context of a performative learning approach. The purpose of this case study, therefore, was to engage in and assess EL using a performative learning approach in the large classroom and to explore the student experience of its application.

The literature review for the study was postponed until after most of the data collection was completed to prevent introducing bias and perceived notions. Once themes were developed and the literature was studied, we were able to link the themes into existing theoretical ideas so as to develop the study’s story line. In the search strategy used for the literature review, Academic Source Complete and Business Source Complete were deemed initially to be the most appropriate search engines to consider. The original search terms (EL, and active learning) were initially formed from the main background themes and were combined using Boolean operators to deliver 927 results which were scanned examining titles and relevant abstracts. Quotes from these journals are representative samples of themes identified therein.

The Case Study

This case study concerned an initiative within a large class setting in an Irish University. There are many different definitions of what constitutes case study research. For a comprehensive discussion of the main methodological approaches, see Harrison et al. (2017). Our approach corresponds with their conclusions; that

while differences exist in some areas, commonalities are evident that can guide the application of a case study research design. Key contributors to the development of case study agree that the focus of a case study is the detailed

inquiry of a unit of analysis as a bounded system (the case), over time, within its context. (paragraph 34)

We are also informed by the work of Yin (1984) who defines the research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23).

The performative exercise in this case study emanates from an interdisciplinary initiative between the School of Business and the Department of Music department in an Irish university. The class comprised undergraduate second year students from music and final-year business students. The total number of students was 150 with 20% of them coming from the music discipline. The gender breakdown was 55% female to 45% male. The business students engaged with this initiative as a part of a final-year change management module and the music students participated as part of a second-year ensemble performance module. The initiative attracted 10% of the total grade marks available for students registered on these modules for both disciplines.

Students from both disciplines engaged collaboratively in groups on contextual issues of core relevance to both disciplines. Groups were permitted to choose from a range of assignments offered and were encouraged to negotiate with the lecturing team to amend their choice where appropriate. A list of the assignments can be seen in Appendix A. The students were instructed to create a performance presentation in response to their chosen assignment. Presentations were of 20 minutes duration and of a performative nature. Groups were required to utilize any format of presentation such as role-play, simulation, drama, sketch, or game, to communicate their understanding. We agreed that students or lecturers would not use MS PowerPoint to facilitate the performative nature of the exercise.

In utilizing performative pedagogy, our approach is also underpinned by a philosophy of constructivist learning following Rust et al. (2005), whereby we engaged with students through sharing the assessment process with them in the first week of the semester and seeking their views on it (Chory & McCroskey, 1999). We also offered scaffolding at different stages throughout the process while delegating a significant amount of autonomy to the students. We adopted a practice of engaged learning throughout, whereby students actively participated in all aspects of the project, from inception to delivery. This concept of engaged learning overlaps somewhat with EL, described by Bowen, where he compares one kind of engaged learning—the concept of engagement with the *object* of study—with EL (Bowen, 2005). Lund Dean and Wright (2017) adopt a broader definition:

Engaged experiences . . . can include any form of collaborative learning activities such as class discussion, breakout group work, role plays, and simulations. Engaged learning also embraces learning beyond the classroom including internships, community-based and service learning, and mentoring. (p. 652)

Lund Dean and Wright (2017, p. 651) implement “engaged learning practices into large university classes . . . guided by an experiential learning theoretical framework,” which closely reflects our own approach to this interdisciplinary project.

Assignments, Assessment, Debriefing, and Feedback

We made an immediate assessment of the students’ performance in class during each session utilizing specially created feedback templates based on the rubric that we had agreed with the students for the assessment of performance—see Appendix B. Anecdotal evidence from students suggested that they become frustrated with delay in receiving feedback with respect to submitted work in other classes. Delivering feedback quickly on student performance enhances student attainment (Chen et al., 2010). Students also report satisfaction when feedback on performance is delivered instantly (Schmulian & Coetzee, 2019). Accordingly, we came to the front of the class and delivered a 5-minute private feedback session with the performing group. We utilized our feedback sheets to ensure that we reported on everything we saw in a two-way exchange. Students reported satisfaction with this process and often remarked how good it was to hear “how we did” immediately after the performance and that not hearing the lecturers’ feedback would have been anticlimactic.

While we delivered this “private” feedback session to the performing group the remainder of the students used this 5-minute period to conduct their peer assessment of the performance. Peer assessment in higher education is supported in the literature and is seen as leading to better learning and development of transferable and feedback skills (Adachi et al., 2018). Working in their groups, our students utilized an online survey, situated within the proprietary application, SurveyMonkey, to capture their perceptions of what took place. This online survey used Likert-type and open questions to elicit their views of the performance. Students demonstrated considerable attention to task on this activity. They were aware that their grading of their peers contributed 30% of the marks available to the performing group. Peer assessment does not come without its challenges and cases have occurred where students seem anxious about overturning an established hierarchy in the classroom (Tai et al., 2017). In one

isolated incident a student brought concerns to us regarding what he saw as allowing other students to “control” his grade. Following a brief discussion, we were able to reassure him that his grade was largely under his own control and he left satisfied with that explanation. We found that fears were allayed once students were shown exactly how marks are calculated and realized that the actual percentage of their overall module grade that could be affected by peer assessment was very small (in this case 30% of 10%, so the students still retained full control of 97% of the module marks with only 3% affected by peer input).

When the “private” feedback session was concluded and all student groups reported that they had finished their feedback online, we reconvened the class for the final feedback/debriefing session. First, the performing group took control and invited three randomly chosen groups in sequence to summarize their feedback on the performance they had just witnessed and assessed. Large class sizes tend to encourage passivity with little interaction with faculty which affects the students’ academic achievement (Kumaraswamy, 2019). Requiring all groups to provide feedback to the performing group online and to be ready to provide verbal feedback at the end of the performance ensured continued engagement throughout. This design of peer feedback provided encouragement for quieter students to speak up, somehow “legitimizing” their input. In the large classroom, we found this to be a significant participation-based dividend. Second, we segued into a debriefing session inviting individual members of groups to explore with the performing group, how they had learned. In addition, this discussion served each week as formative for groups that were yet to deliver in class, helping them refine their approaches.

Following each class, we took the opportunity to record any further observations about the exercise and to agree student grades. Having a colleague present while assessing class performance provides corroboration of the marks awarded and the retention of the signed marking/feedback sheets is useful in the case of a student or group querying their awarded grade.

Student Reflections: The Results

We gathered data from students postprogram in several ways. Students need to process EL, and reflective assignments are a useful, if time-intensive, way of doing this. Accordingly, we introduced a 600-word reflective assignment for students at the end of the module. This gave students an opportunity to reflect on and distil their learning while not placing an intolerable burden on faculty resources in grading student work. These essays showed evidence of deep reflection and learning. We also gathered data regarding student perceptions of the initiative after the program. We conducted two focus groups with 12 and 13 students respectively to assess the student experience. The purpose of the focus

groups was to understand how they perceived the EL activities. Questions generated for the focus groups were derived from original literature on learning, assessment, control, and autonomy (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005; Kuh, 2001). The focus groups assisted in the development of an end-of-semester survey that collected perceptions from the wider group. In the survey results, the class was rated as more engaging than other subjects in which they were registered.

The data gathered showed us that students had perceived the performative aspect of the class as being a valuable learning experience both for them as a presenter and as an audience member, and they often referred to the engagement and interaction experienced during the performative activities. They also seemed to acknowledge the teaching role of their peers and the learning that was taking place due to student interaction:

I found that I thoroughly enjoyed attending all the presentations and noticed that I was far more engaged and interested in the themes and issues that my fellow students were relaying to the rest of the class. I found that the classes were becoming far more interactive and the learning that was taking place was far more proactive.

Our intention of making the performative exercise an integrative experience seems to have been recognized by the students:

this assessment required a much higher level of teamwork . . . in order to create an entertaining and engaging presentation.

Students did not perceive the time devoted to the performative element was wasted, rather they saw greater value in the process compared with the traditional form of essay assignment.

The practical learning aspect was of great benefit. I have retained more information through the practicing of our role play and watching other groups role plays than I would from typing up a document.

We were allowed the opportunity to draw upon a more creative platform when we were presenting on our given topic.

The students also prepared assiduously for their opportunity to perform before their peers. They appeared to understand fully the pedagogical value of the weekly performances.

our goal was to make the presentation as engaging and as easy to learn from as possible in order to ensure we as well as gaining from the experience ourselves

would also add value and worth to our class as a whole the way we had seen as the weeks went on, many of the presentations had.

The data from these sources informed us that the performative process had enabled students to develop a range of skills including change management competencies prescribed for the subject. Business and management students seemed to appreciate how they could learn about change and change management from the weekly performances of their peers.

I found it so insightful seeing my classmates explain such core theories surrounding change through music, for example, one group explained how music can facilitate motivating people through different chord progressions. Such concepts like motivation theories are commonly discussed in business management, but this was a fresh insight into how it can link into an entirely different subject.

These students also perceived that the innovative means of presenting material was an exercise in change and change management at the group and individual levels.

This assessment taught me a lot about maintaining negative preconceptions of something due to unfamiliarity, apprehension and fear of the unknown. I was pleasantly surprised given my preconceptions about the interdisciplinary presentation's level of difficulty in comparison with the result.

The students also seemed to acknowledge the teaching role of their peers and the learning that was taking place due to student interaction.

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Students also had little difficulty in using the presentations to communicate key concepts and ideas to the rest of the class.

An example of this could be seen when we included a variety of musical pieces being played by the music student in our presentation in order to engage the audience more profoundly with the songs that we had related to societal change.

The students also reported acquiring general skills, so important in business and management classes. These include active listening, assertiveness, and teamworking.

I have improved lifelong skills such as rapport building, interpersonal skills and collaboration skills. Most importantly for me was developing my critical thinking skills which broaden my thought process. I feel more confident in my ability to speak in front of an audience. These skills I believe are essential for success in life and the working environment.

Listening skills were frequently reported by students who noted that when they were placed in the position of active participants in the performance they learned how to listen better and to put their point across firmly but with respect. In the video associated with this article we hear the story of one student who found the performative experience as being transformative in terms of helping her to “find her voice.” An edited recording of one of the focus group meetings can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vr9qJtvcedo&feature=youtu.be>

We identified the development of teamwork in the groups as they prepared their performances during the semester. We noticed this development through hearing the difficulties students had in meeting up in their groups face to face. The performance exercise, because it was integrative, demanded face to face meetings. With the traditional “group essay” format, student teams had been able divide up the work (often crudely) with members splitting off from the group to write up their own “separate” piece of the essay. With the integrative performance task, there was no such escape. Together they learned how to work as a team.

In the past assignments have simply been written and a group would simply go their separate ways and write their piece only to put it all together and submit it. This required little teamwork compared to having to work with a music student in order to create an entertaining and engaging presentation. I learned how important teamwork can be in a situation where all members really need to contribute and work together.

The development of these transferable skills, while especially relevant for business and management students, should benefit all the students involved in the case study as they move into the workplace. Anecdotal evidence of the relevance of these skills to employability has emerged from past student accounts of successful job interviews where they focused on their experience and the skills learned while doing this project.

Respondents recognized the importance and role of engagement in the learning experience. They acknowledged that the experiential exercises were more enjoyable classroom experiences, and that they had improved attendance and engagement.

Engagement as well is a big thing, I mean especially like, say for, some lecturers we have they're really engaging so they make the learning experience easier for students.

Discussion

We discovered that performative pedagogy is an efficient way to engage the interest, participation and commitment of the large class. We learned too that this path has been well trodden in the arts and other disciplines. The performance method of teaching Shakespeare, for example, was introduced by Homer Swander in the 1960s (Showalter, 2003, p. 80), and is now a “methodological given” when teaching the work of the bard (Schupak, 2018). That the performative approach is much less popular in other disciplines is both understandable and somewhat of a mystery at the same time. On the one hand, *performance* may convey a pejorative, given how Western philosophical tradition situates it at the margins of everyday life and academic discourse (Barish, 1981). Conversely, the performance approach has gained traction in some disciplines as an efficient and effective way to create engagement in students (Weimer, 2013). Our decision to engage in this form of pedagogy involved debates around the benefits to be achieved as well as the limitations of the medium.

Issues With EL

Our use of the performative in this case study exposes the limitations of highly structured forms of pedagogy, including some types of EL with which we are familiar. EL activities have a shadow side that may not become evident until the activity, and even the class, has ended (Elmes, 2018). Performative learning, as we employed it, moves away from these structured approaches where the lecturer takes on the mantle of the “sage on the stage” as previously referenced, providing knowledge to the students who have little control over the design of the learning experience (Weimer, 2013). The format we employed delegated considerable control to the student in contrast with perceived helpless anxiety often experienced by students in EL activities (Clancy & Vince, 2019; Wright et al., 2018).

I believe that interdisciplinary learning experience allowed us, as students, to have more control over our learning, our formal and creative objectives and how we wanted to achieve those objectives. It forced us to focus on a central theme through the lens of more than one academic discipline, therefore, creating a far more profound level of learning.

The performative approach also exposed for us the need to develop a new interpretation of our role as the primary authority figure in the classroom.

Time and Administration

Lecturers considering a performative approach will make a preliminary cost–benefit analysis particularly with reference to the amount of time required. Miriam Gilbert, an arts educator, sounds a cautionary note:

No one will argue that getting students to perform a scene in class, or even to work on an exercise related to a scene, is anything other than a very slow way of dealing with a play. It takes students time to prepare, either in or outside of class; it takes time to watch the performance, and even something that runs only five minutes will take twice that long by the time chairs are arranged, the scene performed, and the chairs rearranged. More importantly, only a small section of the play can be considered, even if students have prepared carefully contrasting scenes. (Gilbert, 1984, p. 602)

Traditional approaches to teaching using lecture and MS PowerPoint slide decks are time-efficient, whereas Gilbert’s caution implies that performance will consume significant amounts of time. The issues regarding set up and organization are also raised by Lund Dean et al. (2017). These did not surface in our initiative. For example, students were often waiting for us in the classroom set up and ready to go with their exercise. Additionally, we had no expenditure on consumables—on the occasions where students purchased consumables for their performance, they absorbed that cost. Group formation is also a class organization issue with time implications. There are debates regarding the formation of groups in higher education and we side with Farland et al. (2019) in giving ownership of group selection to students. Students were also given the right to tackle their exercise in the manner of their choosing. Invariably, they responded positively and effectively. We concluded that we traditionally do not demand enough from undergraduate students. Moreover, we now understand that when we demand much, much is delivered.

Student Passivity

The performative approach may help address some of the problems of student passivity and lack of engagement so prevalent in higher education classes today (Sidelinger, 2008). Passive learning denotes that students tend to sit in a classroom listening to lecturers, taking notes, and memorizing these notes for the final examination without any form of engagement. This has become prevalent across University classrooms with Cutler (2007) acknowledging this “creeping passivity.” The performative approach is seen by some as an antidote to these problems:

Not all student responses to this pedagogical tool are as dramatic as this one but reactions are almost unanimously and resoundingly positive . . . (Houston, 2008, p. 30)

Student reaction may be the result of their perceptions of performative as being an engaged pedagogy between teachers and students with both parties learning from the process as well as bringing knowledge to it (hooks, 1994). Students also learn that active attendance is a prerequisite for performative learning (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005). This kind of participation, being skills-based, helps students learn the skills necessary for rewarding interactions in the classroom (Redaelli, 2015).

Future Research

Future research may be warranted to examine issues that may be raised by the introduction of the performative approach in higher education classrooms. Student engagement has been an elusive goal for many educators (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001) and research in this area could be extended with a performative lens. Due to the massification of education, high-enrolment classes are becoming more typical and future studies could examine potential effects of performative pedagogy in these environments. To provide empirical evidence for this approach future studies may examine the outcomes of such activities, perhaps using some of the extant work in the evaluation of learning activities in classrooms and workplaces (Kirkpatrick, 1994).

Implications for Management Educators

The performative approach to teaching and learning has implications for pedagogical approaches in the business and management classrooms of today. Performative teaching methods replicate some of the issues of control which exist in the workplace. As with any relinquishing of management control this performative method also offers a challenge to the rational bias of traditional instruction, as when the students move to the front of the class they begin to invade our space, and we theirs, in a blurring of classroom borders. Furthermore, as we vacate the lectern and relinquish the microphone we accept the challenge to take a fresh look at our role and practice as experts and to open a dialogue between performance studies and instructional communication (Pineau, 1994). All these concerns open opportunities for dialogue with students around management themes in a real and immediate way not typically available in traditional “arms-length” case study materials.

Appendix A

Questions for Interdisciplinary Tasks

1. Why don't women get to conduct the great orchestras?
2. What would Christopher Columbus' playlist be on his search for a crew?
3. What songs have changed society? Why?
4. What could Bowie teach business about change?
5. Music in the workplace. Are we for or against?
6. Music and studying. Are we for or against?
7. Music and management for 100 years: Do changes in management theory mirror the changing fads in music?
8. Is sampling theft? Or is it just "our influences"?
9. How can we make the "front man" (in the band) more often a woman?
10. Genius and the bad review: How do we give feedback to the fabulous?
11. Coaching genius. In what way would you convince Lennon to re-imagine, "Imagine"?
12. Music can change the world because it can change people' Bono. Could it change organizations too?

Appendix B

Interdisciplinary Presentation Assessment Notes.

Presenters:

Topic:

Does the work include selected concepts/methods from two or more disciplinary traditions relevant to the purpose of the work?

Is there an integrative device or strategy (e.g., a model or a metaphor, or analogy)?

Is there a sense of balance with regard to how disciplinary perspective are brought together to advance the purpose of the work?

Do the students exhibit awareness of the limitations/benefits of the contributing disciplines

Signed, Reviewer 1:

NAME:

Date:

Signed, Reviewer 2:

NAME:

Date:

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