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Teaching Criminology Through Experiential Learning: Issues and Strategies

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Abstract
Experiential learning can take many forms and be used in many ways. In its basic form, it involves moving away from a strict lecture-based model of teaching toward an approach that positions the student as an active participant in his or her own learning and development. Typical use of the approach is in smaller-sized, advanced level classes where student involvement is often the expectation. The approach can, however, be used to capture the learning imaginations of students in lecture halls in their early undergraduate years. This paper explores the issues of adopting an experiential approach in the discipline of Criminology, as well as describing various strategies to alleviate them.

Key words: Criminology; Higher education; Experiential learning

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INTRODUCTION
At most major universities across North America, Criminology is a popular discipline. When I began my teaching career, my first Criminology class had over 400 students. Colleagues I have met at other universities report class sizes in Criminology to exceed 1200 in a single class section. Students, for any number of reasons, appear to be fascinated by the darker sides of human nature. The logical approach to teaching Criminology is, then, to stand at the front of the room lecturing to a large mass of undergraduates. The only viable grading strategy is the multiple-choice exam. The aim of this paper is to explore the issues and strategies associated with an alternative approach to teaching Criminology: experiential learning.

1. CONCEPTUALIZING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING
Experiential learning, sometimes referred to as evidential learning or active learning, moves away from the lecture-based, one-size-fits-all model of teaching. In a basic sense, experiential learning is an active process where students participate in the learning process that extends beyond listening to a professor speak while writing down notes. Duley and Permaul (1984) aptly describe experiential learning as follows:

> Too frequently, classroom instruction engages students in observation (mostly second-hand information), some reflection, and lots of theories. Seldom do students have opportunities to assimilate independently a collection of experiences or data requiring them to formulate their own system of observing, not to mention generalize from the information gathered (p. 19).

The student in the experiential learning model is an active participant in the learning process rather than a passive recipient of the professor's knowledge.

Experiential learning is also often termed "data learning" (Hawtrey, 2007, p. 144). In many respects, data learning could be seen as a central form of experiential learning. The premise behind data learning is that students are given the opportunity to see primary data, figure out ways to interact with and understand those data, and can then form their own theories and ideas about the data or put existing theories to the test. The approach can be either inductive or deductive, but the act of learning is through individual and group thinking and interacting, rather than mere listening. According to Hawtrey (2007), "experiential learning occurs whenever the student is roused from the role of passive listener to that of active respondent" (p. 144).

There are many basic examples of experiential learning that could help in understanding this learning approach. The vast majority of university professors probably already adopt the approach in their teaching to some extent with, for example, the basic use of asking questions and getting a show of hands. It could also involve such things as: in person or online classroom discussions; small group discussions; thinking moments where students are asked a question and are given some time to think about it and write down a response; student debates; working with primary data in assignments and learning activities; playing learning games in the classroom; field trips; having students conduct primary research; problem-based learning; watching video clips followed by critical reflections and debates; participant-observation assignments; and, various forms ofcommunity-based learning (Renkl *et al.,* 2002; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Light & Cox, 2001). Evidence suggests that these experiential learning approaches can improve student learning outcomes and overall student satisfaction in their learning experience (Prince, 2004).

2. ISSUES AND STRATEGIES FOR EXPERIENTIAL CRIMINOLOGY TEACHING

Any attempt to move away from a traditional model of teaching and moving towards an experiential approach will have difficulties. Criminology professors, however, will likely experience certain issues that are fairly specific to their discipline. This section will outline some of those central issues, as well as strategies to effectively deal with each. The central issues that will be addressed can be divided into the three themes of: a) personal conflicts, b) ethical issues and c) large-class sizes.

2.1 Conflict and Confrontations in the Classroom

When students are given the opportunity to speak, the problem is that there is no way to know or control what they are going to say. As such, conflict and confrontations in the classroom are inevitable. Furthermore, Criminology classrooms typically include students from diverse social groups based on age, sex, ability, gender, sexuality, religion, race, and ethnicity. Out of these social groups come sentiments of dominance and marginalization, as well as strong held opinions and emotions that can erupt into classroom conflicts and confrontations.

The topics often covered in Criminology classrooms often tie back to direct discussions of age, sex, ability, gender, sexuality, religion, race, and ethnicity. For example, one cannot adequately teach students about incarceration rates in Canada without making note of the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian prisons. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike will have very divergent views on why this disproportion exists. Some Criminology courses focus specifically on diversity issues, such as courses like Race, Ethnicity, and Crime or Gender and Crime or Hate Crime. Other Criminology courses touch on diversity issues throughout.

In a lecture-based classroom, the students listen and write down what the professor states. Experiential learning opens the door to student participation where racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas could come to the forefront of classroom discussions. While it could be argued that the dangers associated with conflictual and unpredictable discussions in the classroom are too significant to justify, I would argue that this is when real teaching and learning can occur. In the lecture-based model, the students are still likely to think their prejudicial thoughts. In the experiential model, there is an opportunity to address the issues that are hiding under the surface. There is opportunity to hear different sides and learn new perspectives. There is opportunity for real growth.

A main strategy for keeping conflict in the classroom from erupting to threaten the emotional well-being of students is to take precautionary measures to establish the classroom as what many professors have come to term a “safe space” (Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Boostrom, 1998; Holley & Steiner, 2005). An opening class discussion each semester could include a discussion specifically about diverse people, diverse ideas, and the importance of remaining open to different ways of knowing. It should be made clear that hatred will not be tolerated in classroom discussions. The professor could also discuss the important role of emotion in learning, suggesting the problems associated with learning in a non-safe space for most people. Surely this preface to a course will not magically create notions of equality in the classroom where hatred, prejudice, and discrimination do not come to the surface. But, it provides a signpost that the professor can refer back to with the students when discussions veer off in unexpected and potentially harmful ways.

2.2 Ethical Issues of Experiential Learning

When I first proposed to develop a relationship between a Criminology program I was working in and a nearby prison, there was outcry from other faculty members. I proposed to have inmates who could have special community releases to come and speak in our Criminology classes. I also proposed that students engage in community-based learning in the prison setting through a program to help inmates who would soon be released find jobs, living accommodations, and necessary community support. The fear among some faculty was the potential risk of harm that the students would be exposed to. Offenders, to them, were seen as dangerous. To expose students to this danger was deemed unethical of the conduct of a professor.

In many ways, these fears justify the need for this sort of experiential learning. What these faculty members

failed to realize, is that these inmates were not dangerous offenders. They were finishing sentences in a minimum security facility. Very little danger was actually posed to the students and any harm was outweighed by the benefits of breaking down stereotypes of offenders. The final ruling was that inmates could give guest lectures, but students could not conduct a community based learning assignment at the correctional facility due to vehicle driving policies of the university (nothing to do with the dangerousness of the inmates or prison setting).

This example does, however, raise the ethical concern that experiential learning could expose students to a higher degree of harm than a basic lecture-based model of learning. Even in the classroom setting itself students might be at greater risk of harm, such as psychological and emotional harm stemming from the comments other students have made in discussions. There are also confidentiality issues that can arise during the process of experiential learning. Students might uncover confidential information in the process of collecting or working with primary data, they might also disclose their own confidential information in a classroom setting possibly assuming it will not be repeated outside the room.

The strategy to ensure ethical experiential learning must include approaches to avoid risk of emotional harm in the classroom, physical harm outside the classroom, and the public disclosure of private, confidential information. In many respects, the protection against emotional harm can be safeguarded with the approach outlined in the previous section on discussing diversity and outlining expectations in the classroom. It might also be supplemented with class debriefings or speaking with individual students outside of class or directing them to school counseling services. Inevitably, physical dangers exist outside the classroom. While it might be interesting, any exercises or assignments that place additional risks of harm to students should simply be avoided. This might require that assignments be specific in their parameters, keeping students from having too much freedom in the extent to which they can explore uncontrolled settings. Disclaimers on confidentiality should also be made, alerting students to the fact that anything mentioned in the public space of the classroom is no longer confidential information.

Overall, all Criminology classes pose a risk of harm to students regardless of teaching method. It is estimated that one in four women between the ages of 18 and 25 will be sexually assaulted (Greenfield, 1997). Based on this evidence, it is likely the case that a sizable student population in Criminology will have experienced sexual violence. Similar comparisons could be made with drug addiction, domestic violence, or even secondary victimization in homicide cases. Reliving these experiences in a classroom setting might be traumatic for some students, regardless of teaching method. As such, measures should be taken to provide disclaimers to students of what is to come in the course and accommodations could be made for students who are not able to participate in certain classes or discussions for personal reasons.

2.3 Large Class Sizes

Large classes pose particular difficulties in teaching in general, but experiential learning in particular. The use of experiential learning can, however, solve some of the basic problems associated with a large classroom size. The biggest challenge in large classes is simply holding the attention of the students. The second major difficulty of large class sizes is crowd control. When the attention of students begins to wane, the development of an increasing number of conversations among the students begin. The lecture approach essentially creates the boredom, which then fuels the issues with crowd control. The third major challenge of large class sizes is evaluation.

In many ways, experiential learning could be the key strategy to solving the first two problems associated with teaching large class sizes: holding the attention of students and controlling the crowd. A lecture based style is not an ideal method for keeping the attention of the large mass of students, unless the professor has an ability to lecture that truly captivates the students. Experiential learning, as an active approach that involves the students, keeps them on their toes. Questions can be asked. Discussions can be raised. Students can be polled on their opinions, which is now beginning to shift from hands being raised to electronic buttons being pushed. When students are active, they appear less likely to engage in small discussions that can get out of control. Furthermore, experiential learning allows for breaking students into small groups to have discussions, brainstorm ideas, and rest their tiring attention spans. According to Carbone (1998), attention spans and crowd control can also be ensured by incorporating various breaks that could include simple learning games, video clips, online activities, stories, and student demonstrations or presentations.

While experiential learning might help in dealing with some of the major problems associated with teaching large class sizes, it does not provide an immediate solution for how to evaluate the student masses. In a simple sense, the tried and true method of grading the masses- multiple choice exams- can still be used in classes that adopt an experiential model. Similar material is still learned in an experiential model as in a lecture-based classroom, it is just a different way of learning that information. Students can still perform well on multiple-choice exams in an experiential learning classroom.

The ability to incorporate experiential learning into exams with large class sizes is dependent largely on the availability of graders and/or teaching assistants. When grading support is limited, a simple solution can be tight restrictions on word counts. Experiential assignments can still be used, such as projects that require students

to collect primary data, organize it, and develop some of their own ideas and perspectives on the data. The assignments can then be restricted to 600 or 800 words, which can develop new writing and communication skills for students to learn to convey information in a clear and concise manner. An even simpler option is to simply assign completion grades. That is, a traditional test-based approach might be supplemented with various experiential assignments. Students are then simply given a grade for completion, saving the grader from endless hours of tedious, painstaking work. It is not ideal, but teaching 1200 student classes is certainly not an ideal atmosphere for learning to begin with.

CONCLUSION

There is no single way to teach effectively. There is no one-size-fits-all approach that can fit all professors or that will capture the attention of every student. Even a strict lecture-based approach to teaching might be effective with a professor who can command the attention of the students with wit, charm, or verbal elegance. Likewise, an experiential approach might only serve to annoy a student who just wants to be given pieces of the professor's knowledge to then be memorized and recited for the mid-term or final exam. For many courses, the experiential approach that positions students as active participants in the classroom might, in fact, enhance the learning environment. For Criminology in particular there are specific issues that might prevent some from integrating this approach. As this paper has outlined there are, however, various simple strategies that can be employed to alleviate these issues in the Criminology classroom.

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