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Experiential learning with MBA students: Bridging theory and practice



**Dr Grace Hurford and Philippa Chapman
University of Cumbria March 2016**

What is experiential learning?

“I HEAR AND I FORGET

I SEE AND I REMEMBER

I DO AND I UNDERSTAND” Confucius 551 – 479 BC

“One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it-you have no certainty, until you try.” Sophocles 400AD

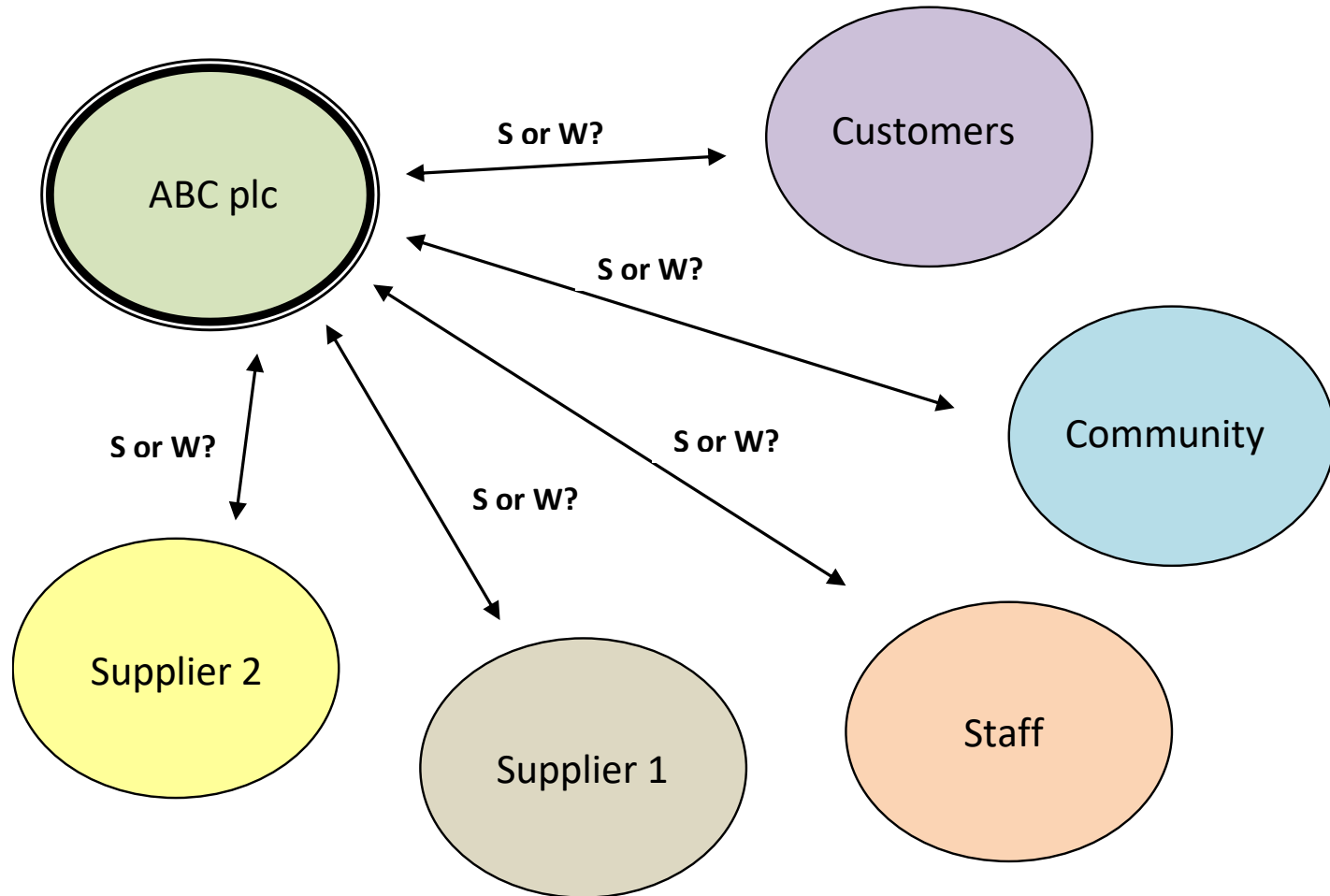
“Learning by doing” Dewey (1915)

Examples?

- Case studies
- Study group discussions
- Simulation games- Phil
- Assessment centres
- Game show formats
- Learning cooperatives
- Internships/ placements
- Outdoor activities- Grace

The Trading Game

(aka Prisoner's Dilemma or Red / Blue)



The Trading Game

PLAY		SCORE	
ABC plc	Stakeholder group	ABC plc	Stakeholder group
W	W	+3	+3
W	S	-6	+6
S	W	+6	-6
S	S	-3	-3

Sustainable Leadership Activity

Student comments

“We lost our focus”

“It would have been fine if we’d known all the rules from the start”

“Management wasn’t listening”

“People said they would do one thing and then did another”

“He’s not a man of his word!”

“We all started with good intentions”

“It’s impossible to satisfy everyone”

BUT

“the exercise helped us develop collaborative working, listening and decision-making and illuminated the principles of sustainability in a completely different way”

AND

“there was a way for us all to gain”

Outdoor activities in sustainable leadership

Developing and adapting 3 activities enabling students of all backgrounds, abilities and cultures to develop insights into sustainable leadership through the use of the natural environment.

- * Water flow versus money flow
- * Earth's timeline and our place in it
- * Decomposing logs and business life cycles



Activity 1: Water, a basic requirement for life.*

- After considering the unique chemical properties of water through a quiz we can ask ourselves:
If water is a basic requirement for creating and sustaining organic life, is money the equivalent basic requirement for creating and sustaining organisational life?



*Developed from:
Smithsonian Biodiversity Science in the Classroom

Activity 2: Earth's timeline and our place in it**.

- 45m rope, 4567 million years....
- 18 laminated cards to position.
- How has the timeline exercise affected your views about the balance between people, profit and planet: ie the triple bottom line concept (Elkington 1994)?

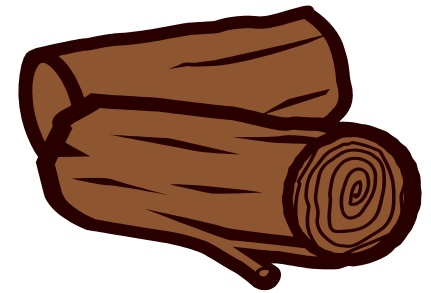


**Developed from: *the Paleontological Society's Education Committee*

Activity 3: The decomposing log: from death breathes new life

- There are 4 ways to classify decomposing logs*

(shape, bark, texture, organisms)



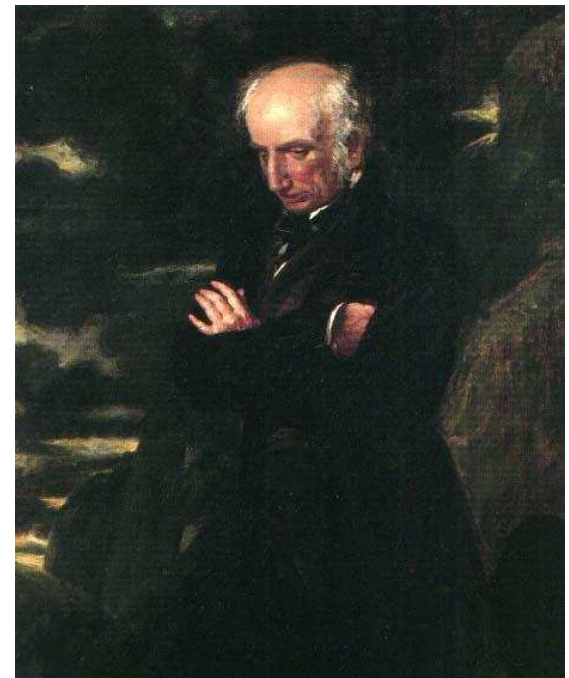
- Can you think of examples in your personal experience where the death of an organisation has generated new organisational life?
(Schumpeter, 1942, 1975)

*Developed from: *Smithsonian Biodiversity Science in the Classroom*

Unique to Cumbria (our USP)

Because we were learning in such a special place we **all** read a poem by local poet William Wordsworth: “*The Tables Turned*” with our key message for the day: *Let Nature be your Teacher*

.. and asked “What does it tell us about learning and books? Is Wordsworth’s message relevant to modern students?”



How experiential was it?

Components of experiential learning:

- Applied
- Participative
- Interactive
- Whole person
- Environment
- Uncertainty
- Evaluated



Results? Qualitative evidence from students suggests that these activities **as well as others on the module** had engendered powerful insights with longer lasting effects on their understanding of business and organisation....



student feedback

- Lakeland Experience is an excellent idea to **explain/bring ideas** for brainstorming
- I **enjoyed** the experiential learning on our Lakeland walk
- The teaching style made learning **fun**
- **Environment** and teaching quality are exceptional
- **Dynamic** exploratory activities were an excellent way to learn
- Fantastic way to **synthesise** the theories and frameworks

Three months on...student eForum comments

- *I now have a greater understanding of business ethics and the potential impact of CSR strategies that are part of an organization's DNA*
- *I want to do a paper for my company (UN) on sustainability in disaster /war zones.*
- *I became aware that we do not appreciate enough such a simple resource like water which is available to us in highest quality in Europe*
- *I am going to go back and try to convince my boss to make an (CSR) effort to see what we can do in Nigeria*
- *the concept of "team" has its challenges, however when they are worked out sustainable results are achieved*
- *This week has shown me that Coca Cola should focus on people more by allowing them to develop*
- *Making this module mandatory would go a long way towards clarifying these issues for MBA students who will soon be decision makers and key stakeholders for organizations that will impact their local, if not global, communities*

Pedagogic approach

“ Should we not be finding ways in which **students** are able not simply to *influence* , *but actually to define the educational paradigm, drawing on the richness and diversity of* philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions?

At the very least, **tutors** should be searching for ways to create space for innovative development and learning practice, sometimes referred to as learning laboratories or communities of learning, with the explicit intention of challenging standard practice and/or dominant paradigms.”
(to paraphrase Roper and Pettit, 2000)

Conclusions

Sustainable leadership is promoting change that is mutually beneficial for the person, organisation, and world at large. We think that businesses can and will play a significant part in this transformation provided they have the tools and the knowledge to do so and are **supported by academics** who understand the importance of this global challenge.

This presentation outlines just part of the tool kit that we use on this adventure. Further work is needed in the emerging field which bridges sustainable business theory, practice and the great outdoors.

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