

BERJAYA Immersion Methodology: Students' Learning Experiences

Chan Chang Tik

BERJAYA University College of Hospitality, Malaysia.
chanberjaya@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article gives a detailed viewpoint accounts of students' learning experiences in BERJAYA Immersion Methodology which is an experiential learning strategy supported by the constructivist theory. Students are assessed for their learning rather than of learning. Tourism School students learn the trade of organising events by getting themselves actively involved. Culinary Arts students are very hands-on in the kitchen while Business School students acquire the entrepreneur skills by organising trade fare. Students develop positive learning experiences and they believe this method helps them to achieve the learning outcomes more effectively. Both lecturers and students need trainings to support this methodology.

Keywords: *Experiential learning, hospitality, immersion, student-centred learning.*

INTRODUCTION

This general comments article gives detailed accounts of students' learning experiences in BERJAYA Immersion Methodology (BIM) which is an experiential learning strategy supported by the constructivist theory. Students learn through first-hand experience in actual authentic environment. We bring experts in their respective field to the campus for our students to interact with them and at time we bring our students to the experts outside the campus. In this methodology, students are assessed based on their performances in the projects which are usually group-based. Students carry out peer evaluation of the members in the group as well as self-evaluation. These two evaluations are triangulated by the lecturer's observation of the students' performance in the group. Occasionally, experts from within and outside the campus are invited to assess students' works and hands-on skills. Even though it is basically a student centred learning model, lecturing is conducted whenever necessary or appropriate. We leave it to the discretion of a lecturer to decide on which mode of delivery to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

The main characteristics of BIM are students achieve the required learning outcomes by having hands-on experiences in the learning activities; they are assessed while they learn throughout the duration of the learning activities. These assessments are more for learning rather than of learning. Students discuss the planning, implementation and the outcomes of the learning activities in online forums. They are encouraged to seek expert's view and peer's opinions. They are grouped according to their learning styles and lecturers shall provide scaffolding to groups that needed the most. Lecturers design learning activities, facilitate students' learning and assess the achievement of learning outcomes. Among some of the required skills as facilitators are using questions to support reflection, developing metacognitive skills, collaborating in knowledge building, encouraging members to share and elaborate on their knowledge, fostering individual and team ownership of their learning, helping teams create a climate and structure that encourages collaborations and scaffolding problem-solving and learning strategies by modelling effective behaviours (Hmelo-Silver and Barrows, 2008; Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

There are considerable research findings justifying the effectiveness of student centred learning. Entwistle (2010) postulates deep learning provides students with skills, attitudes, knowledge, and understanding that will be of maximum value beyond academe, that is, to prepare them for life in the 21st century. This postulation is supported by Trigwell (2010) who claims that teacher-focused approach is strongly and positively associated with surface and non-deep approaches to learning, and that student-focused approach is positively associated with deep and non-surface approaches to learning. However, Zimmerman (2002) points out that despite research findings showing conclusively that self-regulation leads to greater academic success, few lecturers currently prepare students to learn on their own. Why do lecturers shy away from student centred learning? Among some of the reasons are the transition to student centred learning has showed many of us just how much we like being the centre of action in the classroom; the facilitative role seems less glamorous, possible even less important and lecturer-student relationships become entangled with issues of co-dependency (p. 69-70, Weimer, 2013). In a private university college of hospitality in the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala

Lumpur, we engage our students in their learning not with books or PowerPoint slides but with real-world authentic experiences. Our students have to get their ‘hands dirty’ to learn the skills and knowledge. This is because experiential learning provides completely immersive learning setting to the students in an authentic and engaging environment (Llewellyn and Frame, 2013).

We are shifting learning away from the traditional behaviourist perspective where students are passive rote-learners (partly due to teacher-centred teaching) to a modern constructivist paradigm where students are actively involved in their learning (Neo, 2005). Our students learn through learning activities organised by their lecturers and they construct knowledge via experiences gained in the activities. This is in line with Kolb et al (1984) who argued that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. Students are encouraged to build on their prior knowledge and experiences in order to attain deeper understanding of the events and to capitalise on peers’ shared experiences. In this perspective, the role of a student has changed from a recipient of knowledge to a constructor of knowledge; hence he/she needs to acquire metacognitive skills for controlling the cognitive processes during learning (Mayer, 1998).

Our students pitch their hospitality skills against each other in the campus through learning activities and competitions. It is through experiential learning our students gain the opportunity to experience industry’s activities and functions which relate directly to the application of knowledge (Zopiatis and Constanti, 2012). In this article the main focus is on students’ learning experiences in BERJAYA Immersion Methodology in all the four schools, namely School of Tourism, School of Culinary Arts, School of Hospitality and School of Business.

School of Tourism

In BERJAYA Immersion Methodology (BIM), students from the School of Tourism learn the trade of organising events by getting themselves actively involved. They source for sponsorship, get experts from the industry to comment on the events, and together with their lecturers see to it that the events run successfully. Before it all started, students are placed in three groups with each group functioning like an event company with a pre-selected leader. They are given an event theme and each event company shall develop a proposal and pitch against each other for the right to organise the event. Once the winner is determined, the leader of the chosen company becomes the project manager and the other two companies shall dissolve and merge into the selected one. Subsequently, students are given different roles to play such as in finance, marketing, public relation and creative arts. While students are learning the skills of organising an event they are also assessed as part of their project work. Hence, learning and assessment are blended together in this immersion methodology. Students also carry out self and peer evaluations. In BIM, quiz, test and final examination are not considered important evaluation tools. They are only applicable when necessary.

Besides event, students in the School of Tourism also plan and organise local and international tours. They actually went on a tour with each group of students playing specific role such as tour manager who oversees the management of the tour from the design of the tour itinerary, check in at airport and hotel, sight-seeing and eventually completion of the tour. Other students look into selling the tour package to their peers from other schools in the campus as well as clients from outside the campus. Another group of students handle the immigration matters (international tour). Some students even visited the tourist sites so that they can obtain first-hand information to design exciting and interesting itinerary for their tour package. Their lecturers act as facilitators providing guidance and knowledge while the students play out their roles. Hence, the School of Tourism manages her programmes through real-world learning activities rather than rely solely on classroom teaching. And the students acquire first-hand experiences via the BERJAYA Immersion Methodology.

School of Culinary Arts and School of Hospitality

Students from the School of Culinary Arts are very hands-on in the kitchen. They attend practical classes on a daily basis. They even run a fine dining restaurant called Samplings on the Fourteenth where their guests have to make reservation in advanced. In this restaurant, students come up with their menu, cook the meals and their fellow students from the School of Hospitality help to set the table, serve the guests and take reservations. As it is a fine dining, students have to explain the menu to the guests, handle special request like I don’t eat beef please substitute it with another meat, and entertain company CEO who occasionally drop in for lunch. Of course, they are constantly being observed and assessed by their lecturers to ensure everything is in order. Once in a while, we have celebrity chef in the kitchen and our students are immersed in an environment where they serve VIP guests and learn some culinary skills from the celebrity chef.

There are some management issues in the running of Samplings on the Fourteenth restaurant. Our students practise their cooking and serving skills under BIM in the restaurant. But technically the restaurant belongs to a five-star hotel. Our students have to vacate the premise by 2.00pm every day from Monday to Friday. Therefore, they have to make sure all the guests have a sumptuous and wonderful lunch and at the same time politely and yet convincingly inform the guests to vacate the restaurant latest by 2.00pm. Even though, it is a challenge to the students they perform the task superbly.

School of Business

Students from the School of Business acquire the entrepreneur skills by organising trade fare and run the business selling their merchandise to their fellow students and lecturers. First, students come up with their business plan and present it to the class indicating the goods or services they would offer in the trade fare. They source for their merchandise by talking to traders from outside the campus. For instance, we have one group of students selling modern day t-shirts with very artistic designs. And to promote their products they even organise a fashion show using our students as models. Again, in BIM lecturers evaluate the students' performance through the sales done and profit obtained and not from a quiz or test. Students who made a loss in this endeavour do not automatically get a fail grade, they are asked to explain the factors behind the 'mishap' so that they and other students can learn from it. Besides entrepreneurship course, the other courses in this school are still taught the traditional lecture style.

In the management of BERJAYA Immersion Methodology careful coordination is needed so that we do not over-exhaust our students. Lecturers from different schools combine their activities and run them concurrently. In this way, we make the events enormous and grand involving students from practically all the four schools. Of course, we do have students who were overzealous that they spent too much time in the activities, and we do have lecturers who took the students out of the campus for a couple of days and students had to miss some classes leading to some dissatisfactions and complaints from other fellow lecturers.

In BERJAYA Immersion Methodology, students acquire knowledge while practising the skills in a real-world setting in the kitchen and other work areas in the campus or outside working hand-in-hand with commercial event organizer and tour operators. As a testimony of the effectiveness of this methodology, our students participated and won numerous awards locally and internationally. They are also valuable asset to international hotels as interns and most of them were absorbed into their work force after the internship period.

STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN BIM

Students from different schools, that is, School of Culinary Arts, School of Tourism, School of Hospitality and School of Business do enjoy the experiences gained studying using BIM and they feel it is more effective in terms of achieving the learning outcomes through their involvement in the learning activities. Students spent on an average 3 to 10 hours on each BIM activity and they prefer to be taught using this method. This is probably because they are actively involved in the learning process instead of sitting down passively being lectured in the classroom. According to Pike (2011) things that motivate students to learn are interesting and relevant assignments, timely feedback, connection between students and lecturer, connection among students and meaningful use of time.

Another possible reason is learning takes place outside the classroom (most of the time) which is a marked difference compared to lecture style where learning supposedly occurs inside the classroom. Prince (2004) concurs student centred learning 'works' for achieving other important learning outcomes, fosters a deeper approach to learning and helps students retain knowledge longer than traditional instruction. However, students from the School of Business have limited exposure to BIM as certain courses like finance, economics, operation management and others are still taught in the traditional lecture style. We shall conduct more studies to convince lecturers teaching the courses mentioned that BIM works for them as well.

There are many research findings which point to students' resistance to student centred learning. Among them, in Noel's case (2004), his assessment reveals too many student centred approaches were implemented too quickly and as such students were ill prepared to accept it. Albers (2009) redesigned her honours course that expected her students to be more self-directed but much to her surprise they rebelled. One of the main reasons for the resistance is students are not properly informed of the rationale for the change from

teacher centred to student centred. We do face the problem of students' resistance at the beginning but once they realise the benefits of BIM the resistance level drops. Among others, below are some of the learning experiences or resistances obtained from the students:

Just give me the answers, don't make me find out myself

Why can't you teach me, if I have to learn from my friends do I still need to pay fees

How would I know I learn the right thing from my friends?

My lecturers are lazy they don't teach we have to learn on our own

These learning experiences or resistances are within our expectations. This is because usually Malaysian students associate teaching with learning. If there is no teaching from the lecturers, then there is no learning. The notion of peer learning is still new and more research is needed. Another possible explanation is we have a few lecturers who abuse the term student centred learning and as such students acquire bad learning experiences. We have a lecturer who brought her students to the library and left them there to read on their own while she stayed in her faculty room. According to her, this is student centred learning. Another lecturer asked his students to read one chapter of a text book in the class while he was busy with Internet. According to him, this is student centred learning.

Students can enjoy more favourable learning experiences with BIM if we can provide them with more training in metacognitive skills and effective communication. These skills are essential to student centred learning and students need to be ready for the empowerment of collaborative learning responsibility (Yeo, 2005). Students also need to co-construct knowledge and be highly interactive in team work (Hmelo-Silver and Barrows, 2008; Woodward-Kron and Remedios, 2007). These basic requirements run contrary to Malaysian students' education. From primary to secondary levels, Malaysian students are brought up in a very competitive environment. Every student wants to be the top in a class. This desire to compete is still very strong when they enter university. Khoo (2003) pointed out that the successful application of the student centred learning in Asian schools was impeded by students' strong consciousness of assessment during their performance and lack of confidence in sharing their opinions. Other studies noted several pedagogical issues of students' participation, in particular, in non-Western cultural settings (Imafuku, 2013; Remedios, Clarke and Howthorne, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

As with any new teaching method being introduced to the students it takes time for them to adapt. BERJAYA Immersion Methodology is no exception; after more than four years our students still have neutral attitude even though they develop positive learning experiences and they believe this method helps them to achieve the learning outcomes more effectively. Lecturers have to be patient and be ready to accept failure at an early stage of implementation. Most importantly, they must learn from the mistakes and improve the process as it develops. They must be given time to make changes and support from the management to push through the changes. No doubt, it is good to provide trainings for lecturers we must not forget students need trainings too. Malaysian students who are taught teacher centred approach may not acquire the necessary student centred learning skills like group discussions (online and offline), effective communication and metacognitive skills. A Centre for Student Learning Support should be set up for students to attain the skills through trainings and coaching. We can also promote student centred learning via the centre.

There is evidence to suggest that even one course is taught student centred manner it can make a difference (Derting and Ebert-May, 2010), but there is little question that the impact would be far greater if more than one such course is available to the students. BERJAYA Immersion Methodology is implemented across the campus. Its impact may not be as deep in the School of Business as in the other three schools. The focus on campus-wide implementation is on curricular development which outlines the characteristics of student centred learning and developmental sequencing across courses (Cullen, Harris and Reinhold, 2012).

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