

Evaluating Experiential Learning—The Personal Application Assignment.
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The Personal Application Assignment (PAA) was developed as a way for participants to consolidate insights gleaned from experiential learning, and for educators to assess participants' learning. It is a holistic evaluation method that gives equal weight to all four modes of the learning cycle. The PAA is a journal or essay assignment in which participants:

1. Select an experience, occurring either in or out of the training session, and chronicle the actual events of the experience.
2. Review their thoughts and feelings about the experience, making observations about it from a fresh perspective.
3. Develop concepts or theories that make sense of the experience.
4. Create future action plans based on what they have learned from the experience.

Since each step of the PAA process corresponds to a step in the Cycle of Learning, the PAA guides the learner through all four phases, from actual experience to future planning. The PAA is a useful tool for consolidating learning, for developing new insights about one's experience, and for learning how to learn. It can be used to evaluate participant learning achieved through experiential methods and to help participants consolidate learning derived both from courses, training sessions and from first-hand experience.

The PAA can be used as a journal assignment, as an adjunct to training session discussion, or as a follow-up to training games or simulations. The PAA can be used as an adjunct to training discussion helps participants to generalize and gain new insights from

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classroom experiential learning. For young participants or those with overspecialized learning styles, such a guided pass through the learning modes can be a growth-promoting process. In addition, observation, reflection, and conceptualization about experience by participants is critical if the facilitator is to avoid providing merely pleasant or exciting exercises with limited transferable usefulness. Finally, the PAA has been used successfully as a follow-up to day-long simulations and to more limited training sessions. Its flexibility in encouraging expression of subjective feelings and reactions as well as objective concepts and theories seems particularly well-suited to the dynamic atmosphere of the training game or simulation.

Using the PAA

The PAA is most effective when the Concrete Experience (actual experience) chosen has some personal significance for the participant. For this reason, students sometimes choose a personal experience from outside the learning environment. If the emphasis is solely on personal growth and practice with the learning modes, this is an acceptable choice; however, if the focus is on direct experience that generates theories and insights about a theoretical concept (for example, intergroup dynamics), then a more controlled training exercise might be a better choice. This prevents exploration of experiences that, while personally significant to the participant, might have little relevance to the topic at hand.

We have only experienced problems with the PAA as a classroom tool when participants have not clearly understood its purpose or the guidelines for grading. Since the assignment is probably unlike papers the participants have written in the past, all expectations should be made clear at the outset. The Elements of the PAA section summarizes the suggested grading criteria

for each section of the PAA. We suggest that this, the Sample PAA and the grading criteria summary at the end of this appendix be used as handouts to explain the essay requirements.

Guidelines on Grading, Topic Selection, and Confidentiality

There are five elements to the paper and each normally is weighted equally. A 20-point grading system simplifies understanding how each component of the paper is graded and weighted. These include the four elements in the learning style model and a fifth element that takes into account the introduction, integration, synthesis and general quality of writing in the PAA. The score given in each element depends upon how effectively the student has met all the criteria listed for that section of the paper. For the instructor's part, we believe that instructors need to provide specific feedback as quickly as possible to students on why they were awarded points in each area and, more importantly, what they need to do to improve. To achieve these objectives the same summary sheet that guides the grading is provided to the student as feedback. This sheet is attached at the end of this handout.

Choosing a good topic is essential. Select an experience that relates to the assigned course topics. It should be an experience that the learner would like to understand better, (e.g., there was something about it that they did not totally understand or that was problematical or significant. When students are excited about learning more about the incident, their papers are lively and interesting. The topic must be meaty enough to take it through the entire learning cycle. The incident does not have to be work related; an incident in any setting (sports, school, family, church, etc.) that relates to the course topics is acceptable.

The learner should select a recent experience (not something that happened back in high school). The more recent the experience, the more likely it is that one could take actions that could improve your current interactions with a supervisor, group member, roommate, or others.

Two additional issues should be considered in choosing a topic. The first is confidentiality. Students sometime wish to write on a topic that is of a personal nature. They may be willing for the instructor to read their paper but not want this to be read by other students in the class. This is a reasonable request and confidentiality will be honored. Students who want their paper to be confidential should inform the instructor ahead of time and should write “confidential” at the top of the paper.

Elements of the PAA

1. Concrete Experience. In this part of the paper, students briefly describe what happens in the experience. A simple description of the events which occurred is not sufficient. The feelings experienced by the student as well as his or her thoughts and perceptions during the experience are relevant to this discussion. Another way of looking at the concrete experience would be to recognize that it possesses an objective and a subjective component. The objective part presents the facts of the experience, like a newspaper account, without an attempt to analyze the content. The subjective part is the "here-and-now" personal experience of the event. This experience is composed of feelings, perceptions and thoughts.

Helpful hints: (1) It often helps students to replay the experience in their mind. After reviewing the experience, students should write a report of what they saw, heard, felt, thought, and heard and saw others doing. (2) Students should avoid presenting the detailed mechanics of the experience unless these are critical to the remainder of the paper. This section of the paper should be no longer than 1.5 pages long. (3) Students should avoid reporting the feelings and thoughts experienced after the experience being described. This retrospection is more appropriate in the reflective observation section.

Example: We all sat at the table together. Not a sound came from any of us. Finally, after what felt like an hour to me, I simply had to say something. "Why are all of you taking this course?" I asked. One person, a small foreign looking man said, "I needed this course to complete my MBA." Others laughed. Another person, a nicely dressed woman, said, "I'd like to get an easy 'A.'" I thought to myself: What a bummer! I didn't want to be in a group with people who didn't take the subject matter seriously. When the meeting ended, my perceptions of the group had somehow changed. Maybe this was a good group to be in after all. Some of the members had similar interests to mine, and most of them were nice people that I could see getting along with. I felt somehow hopeful that this semester wouldn't be so bad after all.

2. Reflective Observation. The student should ask him/herself: What did I observe in the experience and what possible meanings could these observations have? The key task here is to gather as many observations as possible by observing the experience from different points of view. The main skill to work on is perspective taking or what some people call re-framing. Try to look at this experience and describe it from different perspectives. For example, how did other participants view the situation and what did it mean to them? What would a neutral ("objective") observer have seen and heard? If some time has passed since the experience, do you now see the situation differently? Look beneath the surface and try to explain why the people involved behaved the way they did. Reflect on these observations to discover the personal meaning that the situation had for you.

Helpful hints: (1) If possible, discuss the experience with others who were involved to gain their views and clarify your perceptions. (2) "Unhook" yourself from the experience and meditate about it in a relaxed atmosphere. Mull over your observations until their personal meaning comes clear to you. Try to figure out why people, and you in particular, behaved as they did. What can you learn about yourself, looking back on the experience? If you write about a conflict or interaction, be sure to analyze both sides and put yourself in the shoes of the other people involved.

Examples: In thinking back on the meeting, I began to see how the group might have taken my comments. My comments were, after all, somewhat aggressive. Some might even call them belligerent. Had I said these things before this class, or at work, I must confess that I would have surprised even myself.

But it seemed there was more going on here than met my eye at the time. Sarah and Bob at first didn't seem to be the kind of people to combine forces on this job, so why was I arguing against them this time? Then it dawned on me: Their departments were about to be combined into the same division! Why hadn't I remembered that during the meeting?

Many thoughts raced through my head. Was the cause of last night's "high" that we won the game? Was it the first time we had worked together as a group? Maybe the fact that member X wasn't there that night helped! But I still had a nagging hunch that my involvement, downplayed as it was from previous meetings, helped.

3. Abstract Conceptualization. By relating assigned readings and lectures to what you experienced, you are demonstrating your ability to understand conceptually abstract material through your experiences. This process will help you refine your model of people and organizations. While some assigned readings and lectures will have varying degrees of relevance to your experience, it is important that you make several references and not limit your conceptualizing to just one source. Use at least two major concepts or theories from the course readings and cite them correctly.

By reviewing the assigned reading material, you should be able to identify several specific concepts or theories that relate to your experience. First, briefly define the concept or theory as you would for someone who was not familiar with it. What issue or problem does the theory examine? What variables are used to analyze the problem and how does the theory explain the link between causal variables and outcomes. What suggestions does the theory give as to effective management practices? Second, in a separate paragraph, apply the concept

thoroughly to your experience. The tie-in should include the specific details of how the theory relates to and provides insight into your experience. Try to develop diagnostic questions based on the theory that help you to analyze your situation. Does the theory explain what causes certain behaviors or outcomes and were these causes present in your situation? Does the theory distinguish between effective and ineffective practices that help you to understand your situation? Does the experience support or refute parts of the theory? You are encouraged to suggest modifications to a theory to make it fit your particular situation better.

Helpful hints: (1) It is sometimes useful to identify theoretical concepts that interest you first and then search out and elaborate on a personal experience that relates to these concepts. (2) An alternative approach is to select an experience you wish to understand better and then select concepts that apply to your experience.

Example: There are several organizational behavior concepts that help me understand this experience. One is the Thomas-Kilman theory of conflict (Osland, p. 284-285) which is based upon two axes, either the concern for one's own interests or the concern for the interests of the other party. The five styles reflect a low or high position on these two axes and are labeled competition, compromise, avoidance, accommodation, and collaboration.

In the incident I described, my coach began with a collaborative style, high concern for both his own interests and the interests of the other party. He tried to work out a solution that would satisfy both of us but I neither saw nor heard his point of view. I just wanted to get my own way and practice in the same way I had on my previous team. I see now that the conflict style I used was the competitive style, high concern for my own interests and low concern for the interests of the other party. Looking back, this is the style I have used most often throughout my life; I usually got away with it before because I was such a good athlete. However, my experience with the coach supports the textbook's description (p. 285) of the losses that may result from using this style. I lost everything when I was kicked off the team and I certainly alienated the coach and the other players and discouraged them from wanting to work with me.

4. Active Experimentation. This section of the paper should begin by summarizing what you have learned as a result of writing the paper. What new personal insights and practical lessons did you learn about how to more effectively deal with these types of experiences. This should be presented in a separate paragraph and not buried within your discussion of an action step. Here's an examples of the lessons one student learned:

Effective communication is a difficult skill to master, particularly when communicating with a loved one about an emotional issue. When the situation with Jason happened, I was completely unaware of my communication style and habits. Looking back, I can see that my communication goal was to give and get information by the most efficient means possible. Now that I have taken the time to reflect on the situation from his point of view, the missed opportunities for effective and meaningful conversation are painfully clear. I realize I have to think more carefully about how to communicate and that I need to make some improvements in my communication skills.

Next you should present four action steps that you will take to make you more effective in the future in these situations. (Future actions must be based on the experience reported in the Concrete Experience.) These actions can be stated in the form of guidelines as to how you would act differently or resolutions as to steps you could take to develop or practice particular skills. You should elaborate in detail how you see your action ideas being carried out. A given step might include several related activities to complete it. Sometimes students have a tendency to list an action step and then shift to explaining why they would take the action without sufficiently explaining the actual behavior they would modify. For example, the statement "I would strive to communicate better because people feel I don't listen very well" does not tell a reader very much about what you would do to communicate better. Saying that "I will strive to communicate better by using active listening techniques where I will paraphrase the other's

viewpoint before presenting my own opinion” is a better indication of how you will carry out this action step.

There should be a clear link between your action steps and the concepts presented in the abstract conceptualization section. If the theories you selected provide recommendations for improving management practices, you are encouraged to incorporate these ideas in formulating your action steps. Don't just repeat tips from the text. Try to include at least one action resolution that is based upon new knowledge that you have gained about yourself. If you were to re-live your experience, what would you do differently? What would you do to improve the situation?

In past student PAA's it is often difficult to sort out where one action step ends and another begins. Please provide a separate paragraph for each action step and number or otherwise demarcate the separate action steps. For example, “First, I would My second action step would be ...” This will help the reader differentiate between action steps and will ensure that you provide four distinct action steps as part of your plan. Explain why you would take these action steps. Why would the selected behaviors be likely to improve the situation?

Helpful hints: (1) Project a future experience in which you envision the implementation of your ideas and then elaborate on that experience as a way of demonstrating how your actions will be carried out. (2) Where does this situation exist in your life (home, work, school)? Do you need a support system to make it happen? How will you obtain the cooperation of others to jointly improve the situation? (3) Try to imagine the final results of your experimentation. What will it be like if you accomplish what you want to do?

Example of Action Steps: How then can I best utilize and improve my achievement motivation? First, I must arrange for some accomplishment feedback. This will be done by designing or perceiving tasks so that I succeed bit-by-bit, gaining a reward each time and thus strengthening my desire to achieve more.

Second, I should look to "models of achievement." If people around me succeed, it will further stimulate me. I will ask them how they go about setting realistic goals for themselves and observe how they get feedback from others regarding their performance.

Third, I should modify my self-image to include my desire for personal challenges and responsibilities and my requirement of continual feedback. (As a first step, I imagine myself as a person who requires or must have success, responsibility, challenge and variety.) I will seek out situations that are more likely to provide these challenges in the future.

Fourth, I must learn to control my reveries. Just beyond the borderline of awareness, many of us are constantly talking to ourselves. While it is fun to fantasize, I will try to make sure my aspirations are realistic given my current skills and time available to accomplish my various goals. I will spend time prioritizing my goals to ensure that I don't try to do too much or too little.

Finally, although I would never admit so, I agree that salary is a potential "dissatisfier" for me. Therefore, I must insist on what I perceive as a "fair return" for my performance. I will discuss my salary expectations with my supervisor to ensure I know what is expected and also to ensure that my boss knows my expectations. Wish me luck!

Here is another example of good action steps, written by a student who wanted to stop being a passive follower and become more of a leader.

I am going to take a more active role in team meetings. I will volunteer to be the team facilitator in at least one meeting during this semester. In all other meetings, I am going to make at least two process interventions to help the team function more effectively. To prepare myself, I am going to carefully observe other students who are excellent leaders, and I will read two articles on team leadership. I will also design an evaluation form on my team participation and ask my team to use it to evaluate me after the meeting I facilitate. Based on their feedback, I will continue working on possible weak areas during the rest of this course.

5. Integration and Writing. The well written PAA has a focal issue and a story line with themes that are carried throughout each of the four sections. The idea of synergy applies here: "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts." If integration is present, then the reader can attend to the content without distraction; if integration is absent, barriers prevent the reader from gaining a full appreciation of the content. Are the major themes that you have identified

integrated throughout your paper? Make sure that the reflective observation takes into account the viewpoint of all the key people cited in the concrete experience. Do the concepts cited in abstract conceptualization fit well with these observations? Is there a clear link between the concepts or theories that you cite and the subsequent action steps that you formulate? Citing the theories is not just meant to be an academic exercise - it should help guide the analysis of the situation and the planning of practical steps for improving future situations.

Other barriers that prevent the reader from fully appreciating the paper's content are spelling and grammatical errors, as well as the overall appearance of the final document. Since good writing skills are so important in the business world, there should be no errors in your paper. Use the spell check (and grammar check) on your computer before you hand it in. Sometimes reading a paper aloud will indicate where sections of a paper may need revision to simplify awkward or unclear sentences.

Helpful hints:

- (a) Decide what one or two main points you wish to convey in each paragraph. The lead sentence in the paragraph should alert the reader to these points. Start a new paragraph to convey new main points. Paragraphs should be of moderate length. Not a page long!
- (b) Keep sentences short. Avoid complex modifying phrases that distract from the main idea.
- (c) Label each section: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, etc. Don't place a heading at the bottom of the page with no following text.
- (d) Transitions are important (between sentences, paragraphs, and sections) and make the paper flow.

- (e) The four sections should be equally well developed and fairly similar in length.
- (f) **The paper should not exceed 5 pages in length.** Please number the pages.
- (g) Use 1” margins and double space. Use a font size of 11 or 12.

SAMPLE PAA

Concrete Experience

I worked for one year in the marketing group in the Chicago office of a large public accounting firm. The internal service departments were organized into profit centers and operated like little fiefdoms. We worked very closely with the graphics department. We provided the majority of their work but that did not mean the two departments got along well. In fact, we spent more time battling each other than collaborating. A constant bone of contention for both groups was missed deadlines. Most of the time, a marketing person was the contact with the client, usually a partner in the firm. We set up a production schedule, to which the client would agree, and made every effort to stick to it. But 99 times out of 100, something would happen on the partner's end that would cause a delay. However, the original deadline was never modified to take these setbacks into account because we were not allowed to tell the partners their requests were unreasonable. This put terrific pressure on both departments, but graphics personnel continually accused us of purposely holding onto information or dragging our feet in order to make their jobs more difficult.

It was very frustrating for me to get my projects completed. From the very beginning, I felt they thought I was an incompetent jerk who was just trying to make their job more difficult. It wasn't long before I adopted the perception of the rest of my department - graphics was a bunch of uncooperative whiners. I never expected to get good service from them and I didn't. I

dreaded going into their office with changes and kept my communications with them to a minimum. Occasionally, I'd have a confrontation with an artist, which would escalate into an argument with two or three other graphics people. Then I was angry for the rest of the day. I had no idea how to remedy the situation and I was under such pressure to get my work done that I had no time to repair the relationships, even if I had known how to do it.

Reflective Observation

Looking back, I think that if I had not been so caught up in the intergroup fighting, I would have recognized that the graphics personnel were under as much pressure as I was. At the time it always seemed like "once again graphics was being uncooperative." But I never stopped to ask myself why they were being so hostile to me and I never put myself in their shoes. One of the things this taught me was that I can be somewhat self-centered and ignore the problems of others when they are a barrier to getting my work done. When graphics stereotyped me, I let myself be influenced by my co-workers rather than making the effort to develop a positive relationship with graphics and get beyond the stereotypes. I felt like one of the gang when we all shared our horror stories about the latest thing graphics had done.

For their part, graphics was probably struggling to keep up with their work and deadlines. Just when they thought they had things under control, we would appear with new changes and requests. Perhaps a lot of their resentment stemmed from feeling that, because of us, they could not control their own workflow. We didn't want to lose the partners' business by asking for extended deadlines since they could have hired an outside firm, but graphics had no investment in our service to the partners. Instead, they were worried about satisfying their own clients. And our last-minute changes got in the way of serving their other clients.

There was another person in a different department who was very positive about the graphics department. At the time I remember thinking, "Oh, he must not deal with them on a regular basis like I do or they wouldn't be so cooperative with him." It never occurred to me that this person was doing something different than I was and, as a result, had a better relationship with the graphics personnel. And it certainly never occurred to me to ask him what he did to have such a great rapport with the group.

Since other people and groups managed to have good relations with graphics, we could hardly be justified in thinking that they were totally in the wrong. But both groups had stereotyped the other and were unwilling to change their opinions. Even though both our managers knew about the problem, they did not intervene, perhaps because the work always got done somehow. These managers were more focused upon tasks than people so they never worried about the personal cost of the conflict, and probably did not know how to resolve the problem.

Abstract Conceptualization

Conflict, defined as "a form of interaction among parties that differ in interests, perceptions, and preferences" (reader, p. 305) is the concept that best helps me understand my experience. Our two departments had different interests in serving our customers and different perceptions about each other and our work demands.

The situation between marketing and graphics was an example of when too much conflict occurs. The following passage could have been written about us. "The combination of negative stereotypes, distrust, internal militance, and aggressive action creates a vicious cycle: 'defensive' aggression by one group validates suspicion and 'defensive' counter aggression by the other, and the conflict escalates (Deutsch, 1973) unless it is counteracted by external factors" (reader, p.

307). Graphics never believed that we weren't holding back information or dragging our feet on purpose. And we never trusted them to do our work well without giving us a hard time. We both complained bitterly about each other and never lost an opportunity to slander the "enemy" to others in the organization, which is a form of aggression. Brown (reader, p. 306) states that managers must intervene when conflict reaches a dysfunctional level but our managers never did. They probably did not want to "rock the boat" as long as things were getting done. But it makes me wonder how much more effective we could have been, had we been able to work through our differences. Someone should have helped the two groups diagnose the conflict and its underlying causes (competing for the scarce resource of time, struggling with uncontrollable last minute demands and iron deadlines, and allegiance to our department rather than the company as a whole).

Another concept that applies to this incident is perception, the process by which we read meaning into stimuli (textbook, p. 204). Marketing and graphics personnel constructed barriers to communication between each group by using the techniques of selective exposure, selective attention, distrusted source and erroneous translation. We saw, heard and paid attention to what we wanted to, not necessarily the behaviors that may have been actually occurring. Our stereotypes were consistently reinforced by the perceptions we chose to respond to.

Active Experimentation

The positive thing about negative experiences is that hopefully I learn from them. I do not have control over other people but if I act appropriately, I will have a much better chance of getting the cooperation I desire. This experience taught me the dangers of going along with the group. My negative actions only made the job and the situation worse. Next time I will behave differently.

If I were in situation like this again, I would first try to do a better job of managing myself. I would remember that it takes two sides to make a conflict. I need to be as objective as possible and not simply go along with the group in criticizing "them" so that I feel more a part of the group. I learned that I could have "sat out" this conflict and simply chosen not to get involved. I should have devoted my energy to work or resolving the conflict rather than fighting. In the future, I will take a step back and analyze whether my emotions rather than my intellect is guiding my behavior.

Second, had I made the effort, I might have been able to establish at least one positive relationship with someone in graphics. I should have asked my positive colleague how he managed to develop such a good relationship with them. I suspect his advice would have been to spend more time with them, treat them with greater respect, refrain from blaming them when things go wrong, and be more empathetic.

Third, I will try harder to see all sides of an issue rather than just my own perspective. I should have made an effort to understand the graphics department's point of view and refrained from stereotyping them. I am going to keep an open mind about others and try to be less judgmental.

Finally, I would talk to my manager about the problem and suggest possible solutions. By making my feelings known and telling her that I wanted to do my part in conflict management maybe she would be more willing to take action. If not, at least I would know that I had tried to be proactive rather than reactive.

PERSONAL APPLICATION ASSIGNMENT GRADING CRITERIA SUMMARY

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE - 4 points

_____ Does the paper contain a clear, objective description of facts in your personal experience? (up to 2 points)

_____ Does it contain a subjective description of FEELINGS, perceptions and thoughts that occurred during (not after) the experience? (up to 2 points)

_____ Does this section provide enough information so the reader will understand the rest of the paper but not too much irrelevant detail? Remember that **this section should not be longer than 1 - 1.5 pages.** (Delete 1 point)

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION - 4 points

_____ Did you look at the experience from the different points of view of all the major actors? (up to 2 points)

_____ Did you make an attempt to figure out why the people involved, and you in particular, behaved as they did? (up to 1 point)

_____ Did the different perspectives and behavioral analyses add significant meaning to the situation? (up to 1 point)

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION – 4 points

_____ Did you briefly define and explain at least two different concepts or theories from the assigned readings that relate to your experience and did you reference them properly? (up to 2 points)

_____ Did you thoroughly apply the concepts/theories to your experience? (up to 2 points)

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION – 4 points

_____ Did you summarize the practical lessons you derived from writing this paper on your experience? (up to 1 point)

_____ Did you describe thoroughly at least four action steps you will take in the future so you can be more effective? Remember to come up with lessons and/or action steps that respond to all the major themes found in the paper. (up to 2 points)

_____ Did you identify and include at least one action step that is based upon what you learned about yourself as a result of writing the paper? (up to 1 point)

INTEGRATION, SYNTHESIS AND WRITING – 4 points

_____ Does the PAA have major themes that are carried throughout each section of the paper and are the sections well-integrated and fairly equally developed? Is the material for each section where it should be? (up to 1 point)

_____ Is the paper clear and well-written? (up to 1 point)

_____ Is the paper free of spelling and grammar errors? (up to 2 points)