

FOUNDATIONS OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION & SERVICE-LEARNING

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What role does experiential education have in higher education and at Augsburg College in particular? That is the question our new President asked as he initiated a comprehensive strategic planning process that would culminate in a position paper that is now, one year later, before Augsburg's Board of Regents. Along with four other commissions addressing different questions, twelve faculty, students, staff, and alumni produced a 30 page document that posits that "experience at the core" should characterize all teaching and learning. Our commission made extensive use of the current research growing out of cognitive science as it relates to teaching and learning. Another document of great value was produced by Keith Morton and a task force of NSEE (National Society for Experiential Education) entitled "Foundations of Experiential Education."

This research provided us with a very useful "short course" bringing our entire commission into the conversation concerning our question: "What is the proper form, role and function of active and experiential pedagogies at Augsburg?" Our experience suggests that such a process is a powerful approach for gathering faculty and staff into an ongoing dialogue about the role of experience in learning.

The NSEE "Foundations of Experiential Education" document stresses that experiential education can be transformative, both for individuals and for society. Education has always embraced the paradoxical twin elements of "social reproduction" and "social transformation". But, as "Foundations..." reminds us, Dewey, Freire, Kolb, et al stress that experience can, even should, be transformed into knowledge for our individual and collective development, within our relationships, organizations, communities, and society, as well as in our personal growth and change. As Robert Theobald suggests, "healthy people [and collectivities] are growing and helping others to grow".

There is a plethora of valuable and critical resources that underscore the importance of in the work of Pat Cross, Bill McKeachie, Zee Gamson, Lee Knefelkamp, Donald Schon, Lee Shulman, Peter Ewell, et al and their ongoing research on effective teaching and learning in general. Most recently, presentations by Lee Shulman and Patricia Cross at the recent AAHE conference in Atlanta (March 1998). Reflecting on this "sea change" in an article in the Michigan Journal of Service Learning, I noted that the past decade has produced remarkable empirical and theoretical support for experiential education. The research strongly identifies and documents how "experience", "problem-posing" and "collaborative meaning making" are critical variables in the learning process.

For example, two major messages have clearly emerged from contemporary research in cognitive psychology and learning:

1. the importance of active as opposed to passive learning; and
2. that learning is transformational rather than additive, i.e., new learning interacts with what we already know to transform and deepen our understanding (Cross 1998)

Peter Ewell (1997) postulates that the meager gains in the overall improvement of student learning is closely related to the failure to heed the research on the nature of learning itself, an admonition that we in the experiential education community have often overlooked and failed to exploit as well (cf. Moore 1997).

Ewell summarizes the research findings about learning in his recent synthesizing article:

1. The learner is not a "receptacle" of knowledge, but rather creates his or her learning actively and uniquely.
2. Learning is about making meaning for each individual learner by establishing and reworking patterns, relationships, and connections.
3. Every student learns all the time, both with us and despite us.
4. Direct experience decisively shapes individual understanding.
5. Learning occurs best in the context of a compelling "presenting problem."
6. Beyond stimulation, learning requires reflection.

7. Learning occurs best in a cultural context that provides both enjoyable interaction and substantial personal support (Ewell 1997: 3-4).

From this "consensus" Ewell proposes a set of pedagogical approaches that experiential educators would have a difficult time improving upon:

1. Approaches that emphasize application and experience.
2. Approaches in which faculty constructively model the learning process.
3. Approaches that emphasize linking established concepts to new situations.
4. Approaches that emphasize interpersonal collaboration.
5. Approaches that emphasize rich and frequent feedback on performance.
6. Curricula that consistently develop a limited set of clearly identified, cross-disciplinary skills that are publicly held to be important (Ewell 1997: 4-5).

The research findings complement the work of Parker Palmer, Steve Brookfield, Freire and others who emphasize a relational approach to teaching and learning which also focuses on the relationships between and among learners as well as the 'why' of knowing. As Dewey emphasized long ago, such an approach also enables learners to make connections between their previous understandings/experiences and the focus of a course, discipline or an issue being studied. In other words, one of the greatest influences on learning is what the learner brings to the situation, as Lee Shulman, Pat Cross and others remind us.

Thus, the research of the last two decades on teaching and learning emphasizes that "direct experience," "problem-posing" and "reflection and meaning making" are necessary in all forms of teaching and learning. Our challenge as experiential educators is to embrace and integrate this accumulating body of research and theory on learning and teaching into our own work. Of great importance to our sense of "marginalization," is the clear message that it is a false dichotomy to see teaching methodologies as "either-or" choices. Effective teaching demonstrates what the research underscores, namely that both inductive and deductive approaches to learning require the experiential, relational pedagogies we have long been advocating.

David Kolb has also updated his own work, as did many others in Perspectives on Experiential Education: Prelude to a Global Conversation About Learning (1994) published by NSEE in conjunction with the International Conference that we co-sponsored with other experiential education groups in 1994. Kolb writes that experiential learning is "proposed not as a single universal method of learning but as a map of learning territories, a frame of reference within which the many different ways of learning can flourish and interrelate. It is a holistic framework which orients the many different ways of learning to one another" (Jensen and Kolb 1994, p. 81).

Similarly, NSEE's Executive Director wrote in the Introduction:

...experiential learning is grounded in a philosophy about teaching, learning and assessment that engages the learner actively in whatever is being learned. It is a philosophy that asserts that the development of knowledge and the acquisition of skills belong as *partners* [with the traditional forms of] education, where each can transform the other. By directly engaging the learner in what is being studied, experiential learning then also re-shapes the teacher-learner relationship.... Experience itself becomes the teacher. The emphasis then is placed on the reflective process, where teachers and peers join the learner in making meaning out of whatever has been experienced [in widely divergent 'sponsored' and 'prior' or even unplanned experiences]" (Wutzdorff 1994: 2-3; cf. Palmer 1997).

I conclude with an intriguing metaphor that invites and challenges any of us who aspire to teach and learn:

"...highly theoretical classrooms are like experiential education deserts because there is little water (i.e., direct experiential contact with what is being discussed) to help the seeds of knowledge grow in learners' minds. [Community] settings in which there is no feedback or reflection on the [experience] are like overgrown experiential learning islands because there is plenty of water (i.e., direct contact with the source of experiential knowledge) but not enough tending or pruning of the seed of knowledge as it grows. The fertile flood plains where knowledge is cultivated and fertilized with experiential learning exist as oases among many parched deserts and jungle islands

because there is not a widespread appreciation throughout the educational world of the ways experience can and does enhance learning. As a result, the powerful educative force of experience slumbers as an untapped resource within learning programs throughout the world." (Sheckley and Weil 1994: 7-8)

There is abundant evidence in research and practice that can inform, challenge and support any campus that is serious about the teaching enterprise. This material can and should be a catalyst for a new level of dialogue within every institution and the field as a whole. The consequence for higher education can be a rich and growing conversation about "how students learn as well as what they should learn" (Derek Bok).

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