Personalizing Teaching through Experiential Learning

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Abstract. Experiential learning programs, courses, and tasks create new opportunities for faculty and students to interact. Faculty roles may include one-on-one consulting, visits to off-campus sites to observe student work, and small group discussions. In addition to discipline content, discussions with students deal with their reactions to the experience, student anxiety over learning in new ways, doubts about their competency to do well, and other personal concerns. Three minicases of experiential learning in university settings are used to illustrate the nature of such programs and the issues teachers and students face when employing them to personalize teaching.

A capstone experience at Portland State University has college seniors hold discussions and conduct writing workshops with area teenagers. A mother of two children attending Marylhurst University is able to obtain college credit for skills and abilities she acquired in the workplace before enrolling in college. At Northeastern Illinois University, students interested in careers in recreation, physical education, and health education take courses that are partially taught in the gymnasiums and clinics of a large city.

This emphasis on practicum experiences, credit for prior learning, and service learning are important components of experiential learning and enhance the teaching-learning process. Students become active learners through a hands-on approach to their disciplines. In the process, they acquire attitudes that reinforce the view that the opportunities for learning transcend traditional institutional boundaries.

Finally, the benefits for adding a more personal component to teacher-student interactions cannot be overlooked. Experiential learning creates opportunities for faculty and students to interact in a personal manner. One-on-one consultations, visits to off-campus sites, and small group discussions become important parts of the learning experience. And the content of such discussions is not simply about academic issues. Students' excitement with experiential learning, their anxiety over learning in new ways, their doubts about their competency to do well when faced with new challenges, and other issues become part of the teacher-student dialogue. A social-emotional component to learning enters the picture, and intellectual as well as emotional issues become part of the content of a course.

Conceptual Base for Personalizing Teaching through Experiential Learning

As Grasha (2002) notes in his article in this theme section of *College Teaching*, instructional processes need to be grounded in a conceptual base. Otherwise, they become the instructional equivalent of magic tricks that entertain and capture the attention of an audience but, from the viewpoint of any critic of pedagogy, are conceptually empty. Attempts to personalize teaching, however, are grounded in both historical and conceptual antecedents that add intellectual substance to these teaching-learning processes.

Historical Antecedents

A pragmatic approach to learning (James 1907), and the progressive education movement initiated by John Dewey in the 1920s and 1930s, gave rise to experiential learning programs in schools throughout the latter two-thirds of the twentieth century (Dewey 1933; 1938). Contemporary models of such initiatives include co-op programs required for some professional degree programs, such as engineering and architecture, and practicum experiences and service-learning projects that place students in community worksites. As discussed by Cox (2001), Dewey, as well as Alexander Meiklejohn, also developed the concept of the student learning community in higher education from which the current interest in broad based learning communities has evolved (Miller 2000). All of these writers have noted that such efforts produce dramatic changes not only in what is taught but in how it is presented.

Dewey (1933), for example, generally advocated learning that was active, student-centered, and involved shared inquiry. Today, putting experiential learning theory into practice offers something

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substantial and enduring (Kolb 1984). Experiential learning programs and practices espouse a student-centered approach designed to develop the individual and to encourage learning as a lifelong process. Such efforts reinforce the attempts of a number of pioneers over the past 100 years to introduce the teaching of values in education and the acknowledgment that affective issues should not be separated from the exploration of discipline content (Raths, Harmin, and Simon 1966; Curwin and Fuhrmann 1975; Davis 1978).

Theoretical Antecedents

Because students learn at different rates, and in different ways, learning processes should accommodate such variations in ability and interests. How to best accomplish the latter goal has been the subject of both practical and theoretical debate in education (see Gardner 1993; Grasha 1996; Kolb 1984; Lawrence 1993). There is no single way to connect the practices of teaching with a theory of what learners need. Thus, it is not surprising that a variety of proposals have been offered to resolve this problem. One of the strengths of experiential learning practices is that they are based on a theory of what learners need to grow and develop that is grounded in the research of David Kolb (1984). He developed a learning-style inventory that examined the needs and preferences people possessed as they approached experiential and other learning tasks. Kolb's work illustrated how people learned from various perspectives. The perspectives included our direct experiences with events, reflecting on our experiences, conceptualizing what we have experienced, and testing what we have learned by applying our knowledge.

An extension and application of the work on learning styles described in *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* included the identification of a cycle in which experiential learning evolves (Kolb 1984). The four processes of the learning cycle involving self-reflection and discovery are summarized in the appendix. Successful experiential learning programs have such elements embedded within them. They become an integral part of how such programs are conducted and the ways learning from experiences are processed.

Institutional Issues Associated with Personalizing Teaching through Experiential Learning

To be successful, experiential learning, as does any educational innovation, needs to be supported within new or existing institutional structures. An individual faculty member, for example, can act alone to personalize teaching and to initiate experiential learning components in a course he or she controls. However, credit for prior-learning programs, co-op programs, service learning, and other forms of experiential learning affect large groups of students and need institutional support to survive and to promote the values inherent within them. In the three minicases that follow, institution-based programs for experiential learning are briefly described and the lessons learned from such initiatives are summarized.

Overview of the Minicases

I am familiar with each program from teaching in two of the institutions (Marylhurst University and Northeastern Illinois University), from interviews and discussions with individuals connected to the programs, and from independent reports about programs such as the Portland State general education initiative. I present a snapshot of each program here to illustrate three directions that experiential learning can take and the matters that institutions face when attempting to integrate such programs into their curriculum. In this regard, there are three questions that must be asked of institutions wanting to introduce experiential learning on a broad scale within their curriculum:

1. What types of criticism can be expected for experiential learning initiatives and what must institutions do to encourage such activities?
2. Is a balance of experiential learning programs and traditional classroom courses needed in a curriculum?
3. What can be done to encourage faculty development in experiential learning methodology and to support graduates of such programs?

I explore the first question in the Portland State University initiative in minicase 1. The second one is discussed in the description of a Marylhurst University program, and the third question is addressed in the discussion of one department's experiences at Northeastern Illinois University.

Minicase 1: Portland State University, Portland, Oregon

A good example of a university program that has incorporated experiential learning methodologies and learning competencies across the curriculum can be found in Portland State University's (PSU) general education program. This redesign of the general education curriculum began in the mid-1990s out of a perceived need to help mold a broadly trained graduate. As with most general education courses, the processes used to teach particular skills become as important as the content taught. Thus, faculty find themselves faced not only with new courses and programs but also with nontraditional formats that use experiential learning methodologies.

When faced with unfamiliar pedagogy, it is not surprising that some of the faculty on campus would begin to question exactly what is being taught. At Portland State, critics focused on the learning processes used and doubted if they could provide the content students needed. Some believed that experiential learning processes were "dumbing down" the general education curriculum (Greene 2000).

One legitimate question focused on the validity of the teaching and the learning experiences provided. Academics are expected to critically examine things, and thus debates about such issues occur regularly. Another trigger of discontent lies within the structure of experiential learning. Many people approach teaching with the attitude that "I have '*x*' amount of content to teach and '*y*' amount of time in which to do it." When one is designing an experiential learning course, the "*x*" amount of content is less of an issue. Rather, one begins with questions about the best ways for students to learn through experiences that not only personalize but also reinforce important concepts in the field. Teaching for learning in this way helps students to acquire broad principles and major facts through real or simulated activities. It may not in

many cases allow for all of the content that some people want to be integrated into a course.

Thus, faculty possessing more traditional orientations to teaching are sometimes suspicious of such initiatives. They do not easily gravitate towards teaching processes that may emphasize learning environments outside of the institution and more individual student contact, that use small groups to facilitate learning, and that appear on the surface to cover less content. The emphasis on "getting the content out" interferes with seeing the value of processes that involve reflection, discussion, critical thinking, and a slower pace to engage learners with course concepts. One of the implicit goals of personalizing teaching through experiential learning is to teach students how to become self-initiating, self-directed learners. However, teaching fewer concepts and establishing nontraditional course structures is not perceived as providing enough depth to the learning experience.

In spite of some resistance to the idea, the Portland State interdisciplinary general education program today is well established and continues to develop. When elements of critical thinking, problem solving, and social responsibility are incorporated across the university curriculum, opportunities for new ways to teach and learn emerge. To establish these models of learning also means that a considerable amount of negotiation is needed between "traditionalists" and those interested in educational reform. A debate about how many facts students should learn versus training students in new ways to think and learn is inevitable. Both parties must perceive some value in the goals; find common ground to reach a compromise; and, when necessary, agree to disagree on issues that may have no easy solutions.

According to Elizabeth Greene, the most important element in reducing criticism and resistance is a university or college administration that clearly supports experiential programs (Greene 2000). In effect, innovations need to be protected and given time to grow and develop. Sometimes this means pursuing new ways of teaching and learning in the face of criticism. But it also means that new initiatives need time to show that they have advantages that are difficult to achieve in more traditional course structures. Perhaps the best endorsement of personalizing teaching through experiential learning is the positive outcomes that students experience. Elizabeth Greene describes two examples of what can occur, and it is clear from the outcomes that more than learning traditional course concepts are possible.

A twenty-one year old senior and former mentor in the program explained that the small classes and emphasis on building relationships with instructors and peers helped her to gain confidence. Personalizing the educational experience was perceived as a major force that both challenged her and contributed to her personal growth. She also described how the community service element of the program gave her experience working with high school students that altered her career goals. Such work was instrumental in helping her decide to become a teacher.

Older students also benefit from such programs, and, in some cases, the outcomes were unexpected. One woman was 37 years old when she enrolled at Portland State. She took a capstone course titled "Girl Power" in which students held discussions and writing workshops with Portland-area teenagers. The experience was so powerful that she modeled a nonprofit group, GirlSpeak, after the project. GirlSpeak helps women by giving them a forum in which they can find support and develop effective ways to express their concerns, goals, and dreams for the future. She described Portland State as follows: "It's not this static university that says, Okay, we're going to stand in front of the class and we're going to pontificate." She further explained that universities should not be "churning out brains with legs. I'm talking about churning out citizens" (Greene 2000, A16).

Experiential learning programs are not always an easy sell. Personalizing teaching through experiential learning challenges traditional values of the academy and the proper role of teachers and students. Those wanting to initiate such changes should be prepared for managing a conflict between those who hold traditional values about content and teaching processes and those who want to expand the realm of possibilities through reform. The Portland State experience suggests that such conflict can be contained by strong administrative support that allows time for experiential learning initiatives to develop. Consequently, new programs have time to develop a base of experiences from which their advantages and disadvantages can be determined and corrective actions taken.

Achieving a balance in this conflict of values between those with traditional values and those interested in reform is obviously necessary. The Marylhurst University experience in the following minicase suggests that it is possible to do so. Indeed, the key appears to be finding ways to integrate both traditional and nontraditional learning opportunities into a curriculum in which the approaches coexist and in which both have advantages for students. Allowing positive and negative attributes of the nontraditional programs to emerge eventually facilitated discussions that led to this solution.

Minicase 2: Marylhurst University

Marylhurst University was the first Oregon school to initiate an adult education focus throughout all of its departments beginning in the 1970s. Marylhurst supported and promoted a curriculum with emphases on experiential learning and adult education processes in a majority of its courses. The university also created a premier Prior Learning Assessment Program in the 1970s, which is considered a model program even today. Again, those with a more traditional orientation had a difficult time valuing a program that gave college credit for job and other experiences outside of the university. In reality, such credit is given only after extensive documentation of the experience; if a student's experiences are challenged, typically an exam is given to determine the content acquired. Yet the image of the university as a "hands-on university playground" persisted. Perhaps this was an unfair assessment, but it was one way those with a traditional orientation expressed their displeasure with such practices.

By the early 1990s, the experiential learning programs had had more than enough time to grow and develop. In the process, their advantages and disadvantages became apparent and tension began

to emerge. The dispute, as often happens, became an argument over the role of traditional and nontraditional strategies for teaching and learning as more traditionally aged students were recruited and attended Marylhurst. Fortunately, the conflict was managed in a useful way largely through efforts of the system to emphasize the best of both worlds. To do so, an effort to attract more traditional eighteen- through twenty-five-year-old students was recognized, initiated, and supported. Along with a need to achieve balance in its course offerings, economic considerations also played a role because nontraditional students alone cannot support the financial needs of a large institution. For the most part, the decision to attract more eighteen- through twenty-five-year-old students helped to focus the debate on what was best for emerging changes in the demographics of the student body. Such students were not always candidates for prior-learning credit, and they typically had expectations for learning that were more in line with traditional values. Initially, the needs of these students led to the creation of an emphasis on a content focus versus a purely experiential process approach in the curriculum. This shift in emphasis began to resolve some of the concerns about the university's image and helped to create a more balanced curriculum. Currently, both traditional and student-centered experiential courses are offered throughout the university, and older as well as younger students participate in both.

At forty-nine years of age, one of the students is a CEO of a health diagnostics program and a mother of two sons. In an interview with her, positive and negative aspects of a curriculum that strives to balance traditional with experiential learning were examined. Positive aspects of this curriculum included learning life-planning strategies; improving writing skills; learning how to work in small groups and understanding group processes; acquiring information about power and influence; and learning effective listening and nonverbal communication skills. She also noted other benefits, including learning ways to manage conflict and improve negotiation skills; understanding her personality type through exploring the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator; gaining an increased knowledge of ethics, religion, and wetlands ecology; and being able to appreciate and enjoy chapel music. Using problem-solving skills and completing projects that reinforced course concepts and encouraged critical thinking were also positive experiences.

Some negative aspects from this student's point of view included the following: a traditionally taught statistics course; Prior Learning Assessment credit by exam; on-line classes; sitting in classes knowing you have more experience and knowledge than the instructor; juggling home, money, and work; and needing to deal with over $40,000 in school loans. Overall, she valued the institution's attempts to personalize teaching and the experiential learning. On a more personal level, she explained, "I took this time as a transition from a divorce and as a gift to myself. Marylhurst gave me a sense of accomplishment and the credentials I needed."

A concise answer to the second question posed earlier, "Is a balance of experiential learning programs and traditional classroom courses needed in a curriculum?" is harder to generate. Certainly the Marylhurst University experience suggests that balance may not be possible, but the integration of both traditional and nontraditional learning opportunities has value. Marylhurst was able to include both elements as important components of its curriculum. Unless a school wishes to develop a reputation as an alternative college or university, it is likely that an integration of traditional and nontraditional values will be required.

On the other hand, one cannot rule out the possibility of having a curriculum in which personalizing teaching through experiential learning is the dominant feature. On the basis of the experiences at Portland State and Marylhurst University, it would appear that an environment conducive to such activities would have to be created, nurtured, and strongly supported. This would mean either creating an independent college or program for experiential learning on a campus or developing a distinct institution devoted exclusively to such endeavors. Otherwise, both traditional and nontraditional programs will likely have to coexist and be coordinated in ways that meet the broader educational goals of more traditional institutions.

The third question posed earlier was "What can be done to encourage faculty development in experiential learning methodology and to support graduates of such programs?" People entering higher education are still not trained in large numbers for their roles as teachers. Thus, what most have experienced are more traditional models of learning and teaching. For those institutions wanting to personalize teaching and to emphasize experiential learning, the challenge is how to develop the interest and skill to do so. Another issue is that students in such programs acquire skills and attitudes that probably set them apart from many of their peers in the workplace. Conflicts and tensions are likely to arise, and support for the new attitudes and skills they bring to the workplace is needed. The experiences of one academic department in an urban university illustrates one way to manage such issues.

Minicase Study 3: Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU)

Another way to manage conflicts and tensions is to build on the successes of those in the past who saw the value of nontraditional ways of teaching and learning. When such things become a part of the curriculum, a model is present for all to see. Thus, new people are able to become familiar with nontraditional approaches by becoming integrated into department and curriculum structures that promote them. People need support to develop skills in this area, they need models for how to do it, and they need the company of others with similar interests to motivate and encourage such activity.

Those needs are not confined to the ranks of new faculty; current faculty also need support for their efforts. One of the best ways to do this is for people to belong to a group that shares similar values and goals. For example, over the past fifteen years the Department of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Athletics at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) has developed a progressive program of Physical Education called Adventure/Challenge Education. This program focuses on team building and communication skills among faculty and

students and encourages active learning on-site in physical education and recreation settings. In effect, the attempt is to develop an atmosphere in which people become part of a group effort to encourage innovative teaching and learning opportunities.

Students graduating from experiential learning programs should not be set adrift. A "sink or swim" mentality is not needed. Those entering the workplace may find that the collaborative skills and alternative ways to think, learn, and approach problems acquired from experiential learning may not integrate into most workplaces without a certain amount of tension and conflict resulting. Graduates of experiential learning programs need help to find the best ways to transfer the positive aspects of their formal learning.

General Lessons Learned Across the Three Minicases

Several general lessons about experiential learning described in the literature also were common to each of the institutions described in the minicases (see Kolb 1984; Boyatzis, Cowen, and Kolb 1995). Attention to those lessons, which are described below, can help to personalize teaching through experiential learning.

- When experiential learning becomes a primary focus and approach of a higher education institution, the faculty has to choose to give up a percentage of their course content to carry out experiential learning processes within a course. This often means that they need to learn skills for new ways of teaching and be able to access models for applying such skills.
- The assumptions often made by the faculty are that students will learn the content independently or that they already have a rich or acceptable knowledge background. It is better to assume that students in such programs also need structure, guidance, and direction from faculty.
- Remember that students who often thrive in experiential learning environments are those who are typically from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds who possess rich experiential backgrounds themselves. Providing opportunities for such students to mentor those lacking such backgrounds can help to assimilate people unfamiliar with the process.
- Students in the eighteen through midtwenties age group often lack some of the knowledge, experiential background, or both. As a result, they may be uncomfortable in experiential learning settings. In turn, an experiential learning, higher education institution or course may be criticized and receive dissonant evaluations from the younger or less experienced students. A clear, rational discussion of the reasons why such learning processes are used needs to occur with those involved. In effect, some stage setting is helpful.
- Faculty who are less at ease with the application of experiential learning processes may also criticize the focus on experiential learning programs in a department or across the college or university. It helps to provide information about such programs and models used elsewhere and to hold forums and training sessions where they can learn more about such things. Understanding the components of such programs and how they can be used makes them less of a mystery. Fear of the unknown, which is always present with new instructional initiatives, needs to be countered.
- For several of the reasons listed in the previous paragraphs, a college or university with a higher percentage of traditionally aged or less experientially prepared students is wise to provide more structured or traditional courses during the first two years. This helps to make the transition into more experientially based courses easier in the upper division offerings.
- It is important that experiential learning program planners introduce such programs in a developmental or stage-oriented manner, for example, offering an introductory service-learning project within lower division courses versus requiring a three-credit service-learning course in the freshmen year. At the same time, learning opportunities throughout the curriculum that facilitate the development of students as collaborative problem-solvers as well as independent learners are needed. Such skills are very important to the success of an experiential learning course and are difficult to learn through a single exposure.
- The use of learning style instruments at the beginning of the four-year undergraduate process is helpful (see Kolb 1984; Grasha 1996). Sharing and discussing the outcomes of such measures with students empowers learners with new self-knowledge, raises diversity awareness, and encourages their development as more dynamic learners.

Facilitating a Personal Approach to Teaching through Experiential Learning

The minicases illustrate several of the issues and benefits involved in bringing experiential learning opportunities to a college campus. They suggest implications of more personal student-teacher interactions. In this section, I illustrate the change in student-teacher dynamics in the three cases.

Essentially what happens when experiential learning processes are used is that the content of the endeavor expands. Instead of an exclusive focus on acquiring discipline knowledge, the reactions of students to experiences outside of their educational institutions become important. Faculty involved in such programs report a need to listen as students describe emotional reactions to events; conflicts with others; or doubts about their knowledge, skills, and career plans. As one faculty member remarked, "Students are no longer just faces occupying seats in a classroom. They are individuals with ideas, concerns, feelings, and interests that I can't easily ignore." Teachers find that "one-size-fits-all" methods are quickly discounted as their students struggle with unique dilemmas as well as those common to other learners. For their part, instructors need to become active listeners and be able to counsel and give advice.

Experiential learning both outside of the institution and inside of the classroom changes the dynamics of the teacher-student interaction. Outside-of-the-classroom experiences emphasize learning in settings where students eventually are going to live and work. In the classroom, active learning strategies such as the case study method, role playing and simulations of work and other environments, cooperative learning, and problem-based discussion groups move the faculty mem-

ber's role from "teaching" to "teaching for learning." In both cases, the experiential learning cycle described by Kolb (1984; Boyatzis, Cowen, and Kolb 1995) and summarized in the appendix helps to conceptualize the learning experiences.

Faculty members provide students with what they need at the moment to help them adapt to the issues they face. It may be advice on how to handle a conflict in a field site, steps to take in responding to a case study, or ways to record significant observations in a practicum by using written or audio journals. The emphasis is on the progressive development of student knowledge and skills through nontraditional teaching processes that accommodate individual differences in how people learn. Teaching becomes more student centered than it typically does in more traditional classrooms.

Key words: personalizing teaching, experiential learning, learning communities, student-teacher relationships, nontraditional teaching

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APPENDIX

Four Processes Involved in Experiental Learning

David Kolb's experiential learning model emphasizes the need for self-reflection and discovery. Within his model, there are four processes involved through which this can occur. Each is listed below along with relevant questions that are helpful in encouraging people to think deeply about their experiences. Answers to such questions might be kept in a journal, used as part of the discussion a student and teacher might have, or just kept for personal reflection.

- *Having a concrete experience:* This experience can be anything that potentially relates to the content of a discipline. Included here are such diverse things as participating in a laboratory experiment, working in a community organization, mentoring children from disadvantaged backgrounds, reading a book or article, interacting with friends, completing a questionnaire, taking a test, or any number of other things. Overall, the experience is received from and framed by the teacher or organization.

- *Reflecting on those experiences:* Thinking about the experience. Replaying the entire experience or particular aspects of it back in our mind's eye. It may involve listening, thinking, speaking, reading, or writing.

Critical Questions

What events occurred? What incidents stand out for me? What was I doing? What were other people doing? How did events relate to each other?

- *Conceptualizing the experience:* Here discipline related ideas, concepts, and principles are used to understand the experience. Essentially a personal model of what transpired is developed.

Critical Questions

What concepts and principles in this field help me to understand what happened? What do my reactions say about my attitudes and values? What emotions was I experiencing?

- *Testing the model or theory:* The practical applications of what was learned is considered. It might involve following up our observations with an experiment, inventing something, or perhaps giving ourselves suggestions for what to do in the future.

Critical Questions

What are the implications of what happened for my life? What are the practical applications of what I have learned? How can what I learned help me to understand other issues such as ____? What are the limitations of what I have learned? How does what I've learned suggest I should think or behave differently in the future?