

for your consideration...

suggestions and reflections on Teaching and Learning

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Relating Student Experience and the Curriculum

(This is the first of two FYCs dealing with the relationship between student experience and the curriculum. This issue provides a rationale for incorporating student experience into the curriculum and describes some ways of doing so. The second issue provides some suggestions on how to design and evaluate assignments that ask students to relate their experience to the course material.)

Asking students to relate their personal experience to the curriculum need not be a wallow in subjectivity. When directed properly, such an exercise can actually facilitate the achievement of the assumed outcomes, both intellectual and affective, of a liberal education. These include the ability to discern and analyze critically, an appreciation of knowledge for its own sake, the desire to pursue lifelong, self-directed learning, and a capacity for tolerance. There is also an assumption that these pursuits inform, somehow, our daily conduct as human beings, making us "better." In other words, there is an acknowledged relationship between what and how we know (i.e., the curriculum) and what we do (i.e., experience).

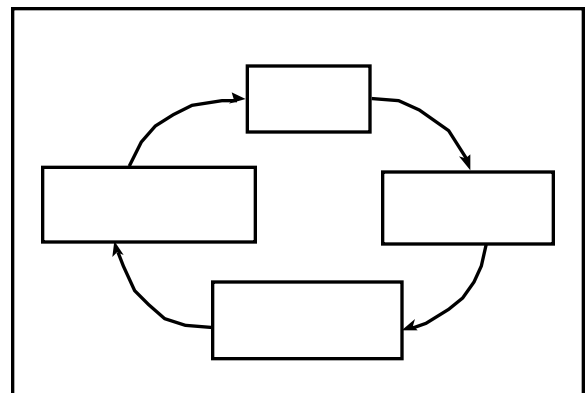
Through a liberal education students acquire frames of reference and the ability to analyze and reflect that influence how they view their experience and how they choose to behave. A liberal education influences behavior less by direct application to experience than by instilling a habit of routinely reflecting critically on our experience within the broader frames of reference acquired through such an education. If this is a desired outcome of a liberal education, how can we as educators help students achieve it?

A number of institutions of higher education throughout the United States—small, liberal arts colleges, for the most part—have designed integrated, four-year programs to support outcomes like the one above. Alverno College (Milwaukee, WI) is a conspicuously successful exemplar, serving as a model for schools and departments with similar objectives. While Alverno has smallness and a highly cohesive faculty on its side (as well as twenty years' experience in furthering student outcomes like this), even

individual instructors can apply the principles and methods it uses to achieve similar student outcomes.

Why Incorporate Student Experience?

Any one of several theoretical models of experiential learning support such programs. Influenced by the early work of John Dewey, they each prescribe a relationship between knowing and doing, frequently mediated by reflection. Many educators use Kolb's model (see figure below), because it describes stages in an iterative cycle of learning that integrates knowing and doing. It also is a useful guide for classroom practice.



According to the model, individuals form abstract concepts and generalizations by reflecting on experience. These concepts then become working principles whose implications individuals test in experience and subsequently modify after further experience and reflection on it. The cycle continues repeatedly.

One implication of the model is that the success of experiential learning depends upon students' ability to observe and reflect and to form abstract principles based upon experience. It also depends upon students' having adequate frames of reference from which to reflect and make

sense of experience and then generalize from it. Educators routinely assume that students **do not** have adequate frames of reference from which to draw and that it is their job to provide them. But rarely do they think of experience as an integral part of learning and of reflection as a skill that they need to teach.

Learning theory offers another justification for the inclusion of student experience in instruction. Most theories acknowledge the so-called state of the learner as the starting point of instruction. His or her state depends, in large part, upon prior experience. Effective instruction builds upon this experience as it relates to the learning objective at hand, because, both intellectually and affectively, individuals interpret and incorporate new experiences (including instruction) according to their prior experience.

Incorporating Student Experience in Course Planning

In conceptualizing a course, specific student outcomes (i.e., what students should be able to do at the end of the course) should drive the design of instruction. For any given course there will undoubtedly be several desired outcomes related to course content, analytical skills, research methodologies, and the like that the instructor will communicate to students explicitly. Among these might be helping students to relate and reflect upon their experience critically within the frames of reference of the particular course discipline. *Consequently, rather than an activity tacked on at the end of instruction as an afterthought, critical reflection on experience becomes a goal of instruction.* In designing the course, therefore, the instructor may select a variety of methods and activities, incorporated throughout the course in a logical progression, to accomplish this outcome or goal of instruction. Some of these methods are reviewed below.

In order for students to reflect upon their experience within the frames of reference of a particular discipline, however, instructors need to first help students see the possible connections between their experience and the course material. A grim march through the course material will not accomplish this purpose; conceptualizing the course content in such a way as to facilitate these connections will. For example, identifying broad-based themes that run through an array of phenomena (including students' experience and the course material) will help students see these connections and also provide them broader frames of reference with which to reflect. Having conceptualized the course material in such a way as to highlight these connections, instructors can then apply a range of techniques to encourage students to reflect critically on them.

Further, according to Dewey, reflection originates in "a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty"

and itself is the "act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of perplexity" (Dewey, 1933).

If instructors wish to encourage reflection then, they need, somehow, to create artificially a genuine state of uncertainty in students and then provide them some tools to resolve it. This contradicts the assumptions of most students (and even some instructors) about what both education and professors are supposed to do (e.g., "Just tell me what I need to know for the test.").

How to Encourage Reflection on Experience

The order of presentation of the following techniques reflects the degree to which they incorporate actual student experience. So, in the first technique, **comparison and analogy**, the instructor incorporates student experience indirectly by drawing comparisons between the course content and student experience or by asking students to do so. By contrast, in the final technique, **experiential learning**, students take part in an experience (e.g., internship, service project) as a course requirement that the instructor consciously weaves into the course material.

Instructors can employ any combination of these techniques to help students draw connections between their own experience and the course material. By creating explicit opportunities for students to draw connections between their experience and course material and then providing them with tools to reflect on it, over time and with proper reinforcement, we hope students will internalize a habit of critical reflection.

Comparison and Analogy

Simply because an instructor has conceptualized the course content in such a way as to highlight connections between students' experience and the course material will not necessarily ensure that students will see them. However obvious these connections may appear, they may not be obvious to students. Consequently, instructors need to reinforce them explicitly. An easy and underappreciated way of doing this is through comparison and analogy. A well-chosen analogy draws from students' immediate experience, rings true, and has cognitive utility for them. It can engender minor epiphanies on which deeper, more analytical understanding can grow.

Instructors can also encourage students to draw these comparisons and analogies themselves. Coupled with the instructors' own comparisons, explicitly asking students themselves to make connections between their experience and the course material begins to instill a habit of looking for relationships where none immediately appear to exist.

Questioning

Another simple, but underappreciated, technique is questioning which can be used both in smaller discussion groups and in larger lecture settings. In its classic form, the Socratic method, the teacher attempts to teach students to reason from specific cases, frequently grounded in their own experience, to general principles. While the classic Socratic method has a rather formal structure, its essential hallmark is a carefully sequenced series of questions that encourages students to formulate general principles from known cases and then apply these principles to new cases; in doing so the student learns to isolate the identifying factors of the general principle. Like comparisons and analogies, instructors' routine use of questioning techniques similar to the Socratic method get students in the habit of looking critically at and beyond experience to a broader frame of reference. Instructors instigate this process externally initially with the hope that students will internalize it over time.

Case Studies

Case studies normally describe in some detail an actual situation or a synthesis of several situations that illustrates a principle, set of principles, or particular type of problem. While not normally drawn from students' own experiences, they nevertheless ground principles in the real world, facilitating comparison with their experience. Case studies are frequently designed to simulate situations that students are likely to encounter. Consequently, short of a simulation in which students perform or an actual experience in which they participate, a well-designed case study is an effective way of linking experience and theory and giving theory immediacy. In the conversation that evolves over the course of the semester, a reference to a powerful case study can assume metaphorical significance, summoning a principle embedded in a distinctive constellation of characters and events. It can also help students understand their own experience, using the case study as a lens through which to view future, analogous situations.

Journals

Journals provide a natural vehicle for reflection on the course material in light of students' experience. Depending upon the intent of the instructor, they can be structured or open-ended, asking students to respond to a particular question or to give their personal reactions to the course material. In any event, writing journals forces students to engage more personally and directly with the course material and consider its implications for themselves. The types of experience they share need not be personal in the sense of private; in journals instructors can ask students to relate some aspect of the course material to their personal experience including a book or article they've read or a movie they've seen, to express their opinion about it, or to critique it. Whatever the form or object of the journal entry, it encourages students to step back and think

about the course material, something many students might not do otherwise.

Simulations and Games

Simulations are games that attempt to model a real-life problem situation. The planner of the game specifies the teaching objectives and then plans the game to highlight features that contribute to those objectives. Simulations are somewhat common in professional education (e.g., business, law, medicine), but used less frequently in the traditional liberal arts curriculum. Instructors could use them to advantage there as well. Their chief advantage is student involvement and enhanced motivation and enthusiasm. Rather than drawing the course material towards student experience as is the case with the techniques mentioned above, simulations draw students towards and into the course material, literally forcing them to experience it. In addition, there are games that illustrate and accentuate the dynamics of human interaction, particularly ideal for use in social science classrooms.

Student Research

By controlling sufficiently the conditions of inquiry, primary researchers attempt to derive general principles and formulate theory through the intensive study of particular natural and human phenomena. Few undergraduates have an opportunity to conduct primary research as part of their coursework. Yet this represents another opportunity for students to see firsthand the relationship of experience and theory and the role of inquiry, as a special case of critical reflection, in creating it. Instead most students associate research exclusively with libraries and solitary activity, even further removed from experience than the classroom. Consequently, primary research represents another way to both highlight the connection between experience, theory, and the course material and to develop the capacity for student reflection.

Experiential Learning

In a broad sense all learning is experiential learning, because learning by definition is a change in behavior or cognition due to experience. But in educational circles the term normally refers to a broad range of field activities including community service and internships in business, industry, or government in which students participate as part of their coursework. The merits of experiential learning are obvious and its use common in the education of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals. It is less commonly used in the traditional liberal arts curriculum, although the incorporation of field experiences into political science, sociology, and economics courses would be fairly straightforward. Its potential applications, however, are virtually limitless depending upon the instructors' objectives for the course and the nature of the field experience. Another critical component contributing to the success of field work as a learning experience is the

manner in which instructors and students debrief or reflect upon the experience together and relate it to other course material. In the absence of this, field experiences may appear gratuitous with little pedagogical justification. When used to fulfill specific course objectives, however, appropriate field experiences, skillfully debriefed, can be powerful and motivating learning experiences for many students.

Conclusion

Frequently educators view the relationship between student experience and the course material as a trade-off. Allowing students to air their personal experiences in class takes away from the time the instructor has to “get through the course material.” In fact, integrating student experience planfully into the curriculum can enhance the effectiveness of instruction both cognitively and affectively. That is, students will learn more better and enjoy it more. The key word is “planfully.” The incorporation of student experience in the variety of ways described here should help satisfy explicit course objectives including helping students see the connection between the course material and their own experience, helping students broaden their frames of reference for reflecting upon their own experience, and helping students to reflect critically on their experience. It need not be a diversion from the real work

of the course. Instead, properly handled by instructors, the integration of student experience within the curriculum can further course objectives as well as the broader outcomes of a liberal education.

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