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Rob Wauhkonen

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Experiential Learning and General Education: A Critical Source of Liberal Learning

DR. ROBERT WAUHKONEN
LESLEY UNIVERSITY

Research Question: To what learning experiences do students attribute attainment of common general education learning goals?

Common Learning Goals: critical thinking; ability to integrate knowledge; skill in interpersonal relationships; comfort with diversity and multiple viewpoints; ethical understanding; content knowledge; inclination to lifelong learning (Leskes & Wright, 2005)

Experiential Learning: For this study, experiential learning referred to credit-bearing learning outside of the classroom, usually in a student's academic major. Common forms of experiential learning included teaching practica, work in hospitals and clinics, internships with companies and non-profits, and work in research and labs.

Relative Importance of Experiential Learning in Reported Attainment of Common Learning Goals

- Improved Critical Thinking/Integrating Knowledge--3rd most important
- Interpersonal Relationships/Ethics--most important (equal importance with study in liberal arts)
- Diversity and Multiple Viewpoints--2nd most important
- Lifelong Learning--2nd most important

- Improved Critical Thinking/Integrating Knowledge

Students reported that experiential learning presented them with problems/challenges that they expected to encounter in their careers; gave them an opportunity to test and apply knowledge and theory learned in the classrooms; led to new, deeper, and more complex understandings than they had learned in the classroom.

- **Interpersonal Relationships/Ethics**

Students reported that experiential learning had been a key factor in learning about society, growing in social awareness, and becoming involved in various forms of social action. Students reported that experiential learning had given them an opportunity to directly engage social and political issues in a way that was especially meaningful.

•Diversity and Multiple Viewpoints

Students cited the value of experiential learning in providing opportunities to interact with people from racial, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds different from their own. They also cited the value of negotiating different viewpoints in working with others in internships, practica, and other settings.

•Lifelong Learning

Students cited the value of experiential learning in exposing them to career possibilities, inspiring them in their academic and career goals, and providing the impetus to acquire career-related knowledge and skills.

Key Research Finding

Unlike any other reported learning experience, experiential learning brought together classroom and “real-world” learning to promote meaningful, rich liberal learning as defined by common general education learning goals.

Recommendations for Practice

- Faculty and administrators should recognize the capacity of experiential learning to support liberal learning, and provide more experiential learning opportunities for students.
- Students should reflect and report on their experiential learning experiences for purposes of evaluation and assessment.

- For experiential learning to be most educative, it should be structured with defined goals. The experience should give students the opportunity to “[combine] theoretical aspects learned in classrooms with the practical experience encountered in the [experience]”; “actively engage in a rigorous, ongoing incorporation of previous course material while at the same time continuing [students’] development and refinement of both critical thinking and analytical skills”; and require students to “[take] initiative, [make] decisions, and [be] accountable for results...by actively posing questions, investigating, experimenting, solving problems, assuming responsibility, and integrating previously developed knowledge” (DiConti).

“...while the student with a proper “project” is intellectually active, he is also overtly active; he applies, he constructs, he expresses himself in new ways. He puts his knowledge to the test of operation. Naturally, he does something with what he learns. Because of this feature the separation between the practical and the liberal does not even arise.”(John Dewey)