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# Experiential Learning and the Attainment of Common General Education Goals

Robert Wauhkonen

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, increasing numbers of colleges and universities have established general education learning goals to clarify and define the larger purposes of general education (Aloi, Gardner & Usher, 2003). Common learning goals include the development of communication skills, critical thinking, the ability to integrate knowledge, skill in interpersonal relationships, comfort with diversity and multiple viewpoints, an ethical perspective, content knowledge, and a commitment to lifelong learning (Leskes & Wright, 2005, p. 10). The establishment of such goals is part of a broad reform in general education that began in the 1980s, following widespread criticism in the higher education community and the public, that general education lacked clear aims.

Since the early part of the twentieth century, general education learning has been associated with study in the liberal arts. Indeed, to many in higher education, general education and “liberal arts study” are largely synonymous, in that study in the liberal arts has traditionally been regarded as the primary means through which students are intended to achieve general education learning. However, as part of the reexamination of general education that has occurred over the last few decades, many educators have argued that study in the liberal arts is but one source of liberal learning, and that study in the major and other common forms of undergraduate learning can be important sources of general education learning as well (Schneider & Schoenberg).

During the 2007-2008 academic year, I undertook research at a university to identify the most important learning experiences for the attainment of common general education learning goals. The institution where I did my research requires experiential learning of all students. One of my key findings was the importance of experiential learning in the attainment of the learning goals. These findings, and related research, argue for increasing opportunities for students for experiential learning, not only because of its commonly acknowledged value of supporting study in the major, but because of the important role it can play in general education.

## **Research Method**

The study that I undertook employed a qualitative approach. The primary research method used was student interview. I chose to interview students because, as Twombly (1992) has argued, students are important stakeholders in the learning process whose learning experiences provide a basis for “informing meaningful curricular change, particularly for general education” (p. 239). Moreover, students as a group are a constituency whose perspectives on learning have been given little attention (Bok, 2006; “Center Launches National Study,” 2005; Twombly, 1992a). It is their perspectives, as those who directly experience, not only the formal curriculum, but other forms of learning which provide a critical understanding of the actual ways in which students learn and are transformed by being in college (Light, 2001).

## **Data Collection**

The first part of the study involved establishing the general education learning goals for the institution that I selected. For this part of the study, I relied on data collected from documents and interviews with faculty and administration.

The second part of the study focused on examining if, and how well, students reported attaining the general education learning goals, and on identifying the learning experiences to which they attributed such attainment. I interviewed current students, including traditional age students, adults and graduates. For undergraduates, I limited the interview pool to seniors to insure that all students had completed their required General Education Liberal Arts courses and had an opportunity to experience the other learning experiences associated with the university’s general education program: study in the major, experiential learning, and participation in cocurricular activities. I set a G.P.A. requirement of 3.0 or greater on the presumption that students with such a G.P.A., being in good academic standing, would be more likely to have achieved the general education learning goals than those with a lower G.P.A. All graduates interviewed had earned a bachelor’s degree from the institution where I conducted my study. Students were selected randomly from these sampling groups from those willing and available. In each interview, I explained that the research was being conducted under a policy of informed consent and had each interviewee sign an informed consent form that explained the goals of the study. As the interviews proceeded, I asked interviewees to clarify points as necessary, provide concrete details, and allowed for narratives to emerge. As the research proceeded, I explored new perspectives that emerged in relation to my research questions. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, generally within a week, to capture the contextual significance of interviewees’ answers and responses.

The prompts that I used for interviews were as follows:

- 1) Tell me about the general education liberal courses at your college. (If students were not familiar with the courses, I provided them with the description that the college uses). As you understand it, tell me why the courses are required.
- 2) What value did they have for you? What kind of intellectual and/or personal development do you attribute to them?
- 3) Why did some of the liberal arts classes help you to grow more, intellectually and personally, than others?
- 4) Here are the general education learning goals at your college [I gave students the list from the catalogue, including the statement that notes that the goals are addressed in study in the Liberal Arts, the major, through experiential learning, and in co-curricular activities]. Which one do you think is most important? Least important? What do you think about the others?
- 5) Have you attained these goals as an undergraduate?
- 6) What curricular, co-curricular, or other kinds of learning experiences led to your achieving them, general education related or otherwise? After students answered, I asked about peers, dorm life, and study abroad, the learning experiences that had emerged in my analysis of the data as significant learning experiences related to student attainment of the goals.
- 7) Looking at your total educational experience, how much do you think that study in the general education liberal arts courses contributed to these five goals? How much did the other areas of learning that you cited contribute?

In total, I interviewed forty-eight students and graduates; forty students were undergraduates, eight were graduates. I also conducted three focus group interviews.

## **Institution**

At the institution where I conducted the research, all students are required to complete between 9-15 credit hours of course related experiential learning. Common forms of experiential learning include practica and work in schools, health clinics, and hospitals; work in clinics and community based organizations; internships with companies and non-profits; work in research laboratories; academic research and writing-based internships. Given that the primary purpose of the study was to identify the most significant learning experiences to which students attributed attainment of common general education learning goals, I selected an institution that had learning goals typical of common general education learning goals throughout the country. The learning goals called for students to do the following: develop content knowledge in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences (fundamental base of knowledge goal); improve critical thinking skills (critical thinking goal); develop social awareness and responsibility (social responsibility goal); develop increased comfort with cultural and social differences (multiple perspectives goal); and develop an inclination for lifelong learning (lifelong learning goal). (Learning Goals at University A).

## **Data Analysis and Research Findings**

As I collected data, I analyzed it using open coding. Initial coding focused on creating descriptive categories from the data gathered from interviews with students and graduates. After all of the field data had been coded, I then used axial coding to examine the interrelationships between and among the codes I had identified in relation to student attainment of the learning goals. The following nine significant learning experiences were identified: study in the liberal arts; study in the major; course-based experiential learning; participation in co-curricular activities; effective teaching; peer interaction; life in the dormitories; study abroad; and, for adult students, life experience. Of these nine, four were most significant in that they were among the top three learning experiences attributed to attainment of the goals: study in the liberal arts; experiential learning; study in the major; and effective teaching. Of these, experiential learning was second most important overall in that it was among the three most important learning experiences for four of the five learning goals.

## **Experiential Learning and Critical Reasoning**

The critical reasoning goal called for students to “develop the ability to solve unfamiliar problems and generate new meaning” (Learning Goals at University A). Experiential learning was the third most significant learning experience for attainment of the goal. The value of experiential learning with respect to the goal lay, in large part, in the opportunities and demands that internships, practica, and other experiences presented students to address “real life” problems. Consistently, students talked about how they had been required to go beyond current levels of skill and understanding in experiential settings, developing greater skill, understanding, and problem-solving ability. They noted that the opportunity to negotiate such challenges and problems was deeply meaningful in giving them a chance to address the kinds of problems and challenges they expected to encounter in their careers. Students also noted how internships, practica, and other forms of experiential learning provided an opportunity to apply or test knowledge or theoretical models learned in the classroom. They explained that, in so doing, they gained a fuller, richer, and more nuanced understanding of what they had learned in their classes.

Students consistently reported that experiential learning “brought classroom learning to life.”

Many students reported that their experiential learning opportunities were among the most meaningful and intellectually engaging learning experiences of their college years. One traditional age student, who had done an internship working with a probation officer and planned to get a graduate degree in Criminology, explained how the day-to-day decision making she had been required to make in working with parolees had helped her develop an

understanding of the challenges of such work, as well as the emerging skills she needed beyond which her classes had provided. “The theory that I learned in sociology and criminal justice classes that I took definitely helped me to try to figure out these guys, how you would help them.” However, with regard to actually applying and making use of such learning, it was the internship itself, she noted, that “helped me to put it into practice.” Another traditional age student, in talking about her teaching practica said, “Field experience would definitely come into play [in relation to the goal], because you had to keep journals, we had to synthesize a lot of it, and we had to learn from those experiences and discuss what it was we were learning, what worked and what didn’t.” A counseling major, reflecting on how her psychology classes had informed work she’d done in an internship, said, succinctly, “I think that the two together [i.e., classroom learning and experiential learning], it’s like two halves that create a whole.”

Many students said they saw a vital connection between experiential and classroom learning regarding their growth in critical thinking, noting that the two reinforced one another in a unique way. They reported consistently how internships, teaching practica, and other experiences gave them an opportunity to apply, use, and test classroom learning in problem solving and decision-making situations in a way that classroom learning alone could not. Education majors noted how classroom teaching helped them to learn to “think on their feet” in working with students, something they could only experience by being in front of a classroom. Human service majors noted how working in clinics with actual clients, helped them to negotiate challenges that they could not have experienced otherwise, leading to increased confidence and preparedness. Over and over again, students spoke about how experiential learning “made it real,” providing them with a capacity and confidence to meet the demands and challenges they expected to encounter in their intended fields.

## **Experiential Learning and Social Responsibility**

The social responsibility goal called for students to “develop an understanding of the individual’s role in the larger community and the natural world and an awareness of the importance of involvement in them” (Learning Goals at University A). Experiential learning was of equal importance with study in the liberal arts for this goal. Students and graduates alike noted that experiential learning, most often in the form of an internship, had been a key factor in their growth in social awareness and, sometimes, social action. With respect to this goal, many students who discussed the role of internships spoke passionately and earnestly about how the internships had influenced them. Students noted that study in the liberal arts and study in the human service majors deepened their understanding of social and political matters and contributed to their civic and social awareness. Experiential learning had given them an opportunity to engage social and political issues concretely. Students’ experiential learning reinforced study in the liberal arts and supported achievement of the social responsibility learning goal, as it did with the critical reasoning skills. One student said:

For me, moving on to grad school...I purposely chose internships that were heavy on social responsibility...working with non-profit, and in different capacities, like direct service policies, understanding larger issues, doing studies, supervising meetings, and gaining an awareness in that area. I think for me, personally, internships have been the greatest learning experience.

Similarly, a graduate who changed her major from human services to English and who was currently in graduate school, said:

When I was doing human services...I remember that [my required internship] helped me grow immensely. That really did change things for me. And I know that's why, even though I did not stay exactly with the path, I kind of took a little divide off, but it definitely influenced my life and how I continued to try and work with Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and donated to them, by doing a whole bunch of different things...There are certain things I realize, now looking back, that you don't get in the classroom.

Students, especially those who worked in internships that involved community service, reported that working with people outside of the college on social, educational, and health issues had changed them. Many reported that they had become more compassionate, more committed to helping others, and more politically engaged. One student, who had worked with students in an inner city school, talked about how that experience had made her aware of poverty in a way she had never understood:

The students were from...very poor areas. It was important to help with them with homework. Because students were coming at the end of the day, they were hungry. So we brought food for them because their lunch was served at 10:45. So they were complaining they didn't want to do anything. Some of them, the schools were so overenrolled, they'd all be getting subsidized food, then by the time they sat down they had 7 minutes for lunch. Also, the portions were not very good. I was pretty shocked. I thought no grown kid could subsist on that... You've got to see it first hand...That's something you might learn in the classroom, but it's not the same as being out in the real world.

Over and over again, students who had done similar internships said that they had become both more aware of and more committed to addressing social problems. Said one human services major, in a comment that represented many other such views, "I feel like I'm now officially in the service of humanity and in the service of social justice, but more so service of humanity, and I think that's definitely unique to [this college]."

## Experiential Learning and Multiple Perspectives

The multiple perspectives goal called for students to “develop an awareness of multiple viewpoints by exploring the relationship among values, attitudes, cultures, and behaviors” (Learning Goals at University A). Experiential learning was the second most important learning experience attributed to development of the goal. In citing experiential learning, students talked about the opportunities it provided for interacting with people who had viewpoints and backgrounds different from their own. Many students noted how these opportunities were exciting because they occurred in settings, such as those in which they envisioned themselves working after graduation. One traditional age student reported that, in her internships, she had “worked mostly within communities of color...Diverse groups like that boosted my knowledge of multiple perspectives and what people’s cultures and norms are and the best ways to interact.” Similarly, an adult student said,

I don’t feel that the school has contributed much to [the goal], but definitely working with all, you know, Hispanic populations, in the inner city, working now for the [a large city] school system, I think that’s where the perspectives have grown, just the awareness of different cultures and viewpoints.

A graduate, looking back at her years at the university, said,

I think internships are what gave me the multiple perspectives. It brought me outside of the classroom into the wide world. I remember it was kind of unique to [the university], and I remember thinking that was something that helped me, you know, to grow.

Many students who had done internships reported that their social interactions had enhanced their ability to work as part of a group, in particular with others whose backgrounds and values were different from their own. Many reported that they had become better listeners and were more sensitive to cultural differences. They noted that such development was valuable in that they saw themselves living in a world that was becoming increasingly racially, culturally, and socially diverse.

## Experiential Learning and Lifelong Learning

The lifelong learning goal called for students to “acquire the interest and ability to further their learning” (Learning Goals at University A). Some students interpreted the goal as a strengthening of their intellectual curiosity, often related to the arts, culture, politics, or social concerns. The majority of students understood it as having found an interest or orientation that led to the choice of an academic major. Evidence of having attained the goal was settling upon a major or deciding to go to graduate school. One student cited it as the most important goal “because whatever field you’re in, there are new developments going



on, and I think it's very important to be a lifelong learner, whether it's professionally or personally.”

Experiential learning was the second most significant learning experience to which students attributed development in the goal, after study in the major. For many, experiential learning played a critical role in providing hands-on, real world opportunities to work in specific areas or fields. As with other learning goals, students noted a reciprocal relationship between classroom and experiential learning, where the latter validated and made more meaningful the former. One student recalled how her internship had underscored the value of study in her major and helped her to see her college studies in a context that extended beyond the college and the classroom:

What I was saying earlier about finding inspiration outside of the classroom and having that be my motivation for learning in the class. I felt like my internships were one of the main places where I found that inspiration of these subjects that are really interesting to me, how I can learn more about them academically so then I can then bring them back out into the field. I don't think I would even have known about some of the areas that I was learning about in my internships if I didn't have them, because sometimes it seems like what you can do as a career is not emphasized enough in academia for some reasons.

Just today, one of the women from the career resource center was talking about the practicums, and the Master's programs and the careers you can pursue, and sometimes you don't even know you can be an industrial psychologist or, you know, things like that...sometimes when you're in the field you hear about things like that. I feel like I got inspiration to continue learning outside of the classroom, and understanding my role in society and what I want that role to be. So I've gained a lot from my internships and I think above all I'm really glad that [the college] emphasizes that, they're very important to understand what information is relevant.

Similarly, another student noted how her internships had clarified her career goals in a way that classroom learning could not:

I wonder if I'd just been in a professional program where I wasn't participating in experiential learning [if my life] would have gone down a different path... [Because of my internships] I know that I want to take my learning beyond the social work practice in terms of policy and legislation and things like that. I certainly feel that my experiential learning experiences have served as a fuel for my lifelong learning, [and] given me an interest that I just don't think I would have without the experiences that I had.

Over and over again, students emphasized how important experiential learning was to this goal. For most, the opportunity to be in a work setting related to their academic interests and career goals clarified and affirmed their choice of major, leading to increased enthusiasm and

motivation for being in college. Many students spoke about how their positive experiences with experiential learning provided a sense of increased confidence and personal validation, as well.

A small number of students reported that their experiential learning had made them question their original career goals and, for some, led to a change of major. Yet, as with those who had had positive experiences, they felt that experiential learning was important in helping them to realize where their academic and career interests lay in a way that classroom learning had not.

### **Experiential Learning and Study in the Humanities, Sciences, and Social Sciences**

Experiential learning was not one of the most significant learning experiences in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Study in required liberal arts courses and effective teaching were the two most significant reported learning experiences. However, students did report that internships, teaching practica, and research opportunities were important to the goal in enhancing learning and strengthening skills acquired in liberal arts courses. This was especially true for experiential learning opportunities that required writing and math skills. A number of education students, especially those who majored in liberal arts areas, reported that their teaching practica helped them to master content and skills in their disciplines. More generally, many students noted how, in providing opportunities to use knowledge and skills learned in their classes, experiential learning affirmed the value of their liberal arts classes.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

The degree to which students attributed development in the general education learning goals to experiential learning varied according to the nature and *quality* of the experiential learning experience. Generally speaking, students whose experiential learning experiences allowed them to apply what they had learned in their classes, who had mentors, and who worked with other students or those in the community found the experience most meaningful. It also varied according to major. Students in the social sciences, education, and pre-professional areas of study were most enthusiastic about the value of their experiential learning, which typically consisted of internships and teaching practica. Such internships and practica did typically involve work with mentors or supervisors, were structured so that students could interact regularly with other students, and took place in educational or community-based settings.

Students who were not supervised, whose internships were less structured, and who had little interaction with other students or the community typically found their experiences less meaningful. These differences aside, students reported that experiential learning was one of

the most valuable learning experiences of their college years. Indeed, when asked to identify the most meaningful learning experience of their college experience, a majority of students cited experiential learning.

The study's findings are consistent with other research on the value of experiential learning. With regard to critical thinking, the study affirms Stanton's (1990) finding that learning that requires students to apply knowledge and skills in problem-solving situations supports the development of higher cognitive skills more effectively than does classroom learning alone. Indeed, many students reported their internships and other forms of experiential learning which provided opportunities for testing and applying knowledge and skills learned in the classroom brought them to a higher level of understanding and skill competency. As a result, they said they emerged with deeper content knowledge and improved skills. This reported enhancement of understanding and skills supports Cassidy and Ryan's (1996) position that "passive" knowledge, such as that learned in the classroom, becomes complete only with "active learning." Students also reported that the knowledge and skills they had learned in the classroom became more important to them because they applied them in "real world" situations.

The study's findings similarly support theory and research regarding the value of experiential learning with respect to the social responsibility and multiple perspectives goals. The reported capacity for experiential learning to support these goals was particularly strong for their affective and ethical dimensions. These are implicit in the social responsibility goal for students to become more socially engaged, and the multiple perspectives goal for students to gain greater understanding and acceptance of social and cultural differences. Regarding the social responsibility goal, many students who had done internships in community based settings reported that these experiences which afforded them opportunities to work with people in the community greatly enhanced their understanding of and sensitivity to social problems. These outcomes also extended to those employed in clinics and social agencies. Even as students praised their social science and humanities courses for broadening their understanding of social problems and concerns, they lauded their community based work for "making it real." Many students, who described themselves as politically and socially conscious, reported that such internships were the most valuable part of their education.

Such reports underscore Saltmarsh's (2008) argument that the active, relational learning, typical of such learning experiences, results in students "becoming active participants in democratic life instead of being spectators to a shallow form of democracy" (p. 67). Similarly, they argue for Nesteruk's (2007) position that ...ethics education needs to be more closely connected to experiential learning programs.... Such programs often raise ethical issues and are ripe for moral reflection. It is in such concrete and localized learning situations...that students can experience the effects of their actions on others. (p. 53)

The increased capacity that students reported for understanding cultural and social differences derived from such engagement with others. The adult student who reported that his work in an inner-city school system had provided him with “the awareness of different cultures and viewpoints” typified such reports. With regard to increased understanding of differences in race, class, and gender, students consistently reported that internships and other forms of experiential learning were among their most critical learning experiences. Goldstein and Fernald (2008), in their research on how students reported being changed by an experientially based capstone course in psychology, found similar affective changes. “Some of the greatest gains in personal growth are evident in an increased capacity to be more accepting of others. One intern wrote, ‘The course has given me great understanding and acceptance of others, teaching me not to judge others...an invaluable experience’” (p. 32).

Many students, as noted, reported that their internships had enhanced their ability to interact with others in a workplace setting. These findings are consistent with research conducted by Northeastern University on the value of experiential learning for its students. Northeastern University is well known for its cooperative education program, which is regarded by the University as a key form of experiential learning. In a study conducted by Northeastern on the value of their co-operative work experience (“co-op”) on job expertise and personal and professional development, 84.8 % of students reported that co-op had given them the opportunity to work as part of a team; 83.5% of students reported that co-op had enhanced their job related skills; 83.9% reported that co-op had promoted their personal and professional growth; and 83.4 % reported that co-op had promoted independent thought and action (Feldscher, 2007).

These research findings reflect the high value that students in this study attributed to experiential learning with respect to the lifelong learning goal. Many students reported that internships, practica, and other forms of experiential learning, had motivated them to acquire the career-related knowledge and skills that they saw as necessary to succeed in their fields, a motivation that they expected would be sustained over a lifetime. For these students, the opportunities that internships and other forms of experiential learning provided were critical to the goal.

The reasons that students found experiential learning significant in the attainment of these learning goals reflect many facets of constructivist theory. In giving students the opportunity to take what they had learned in their classes and transform it into new, higher order knowledge, experiential learning embodies Dewey’s (1916) constructivist ideal of education as “a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience” (p.76). Moreover, part of the reason that students regarded it as such a significant form of learning lay in its being related to their academic and career interests. This made it especially meaningful and, as such, imbued it with the “quality of experience” (Dewey, 1997/1938, p. 27) that Dewey argued was a critical factor in learning.

With regard to the development of social responsibility, Dewey, as Benson, Harkavy and Puckett (2007) observe in their recent book *Dewey's Dream*, "...emphasized that action-oriented, collaborative, real world problem-solving education can function as the most powerful means to raise the level of instrumental intelligence in individuals, groups, communities, societies, and humanity" (p. 25). Indeed, Dewey valued experiential learning in large part because of its capacity to bring about social change.

The growth called for in the multiple perspectives goal, acceptance of differing cultural and social beliefs, was essentially a form of ethical growth. Here, too, constructivist views apply. Dewey (1897/1964) held that moral growth was best accomplished in educational settings that allow students to apply and test ethical judgment in real-life situations. In the most common types of experiential learning—internships, teaching practica, community service—students found themselves in situations that required that they exercise some degree of ethical judgment.

### **Significance of Findings for General Education Practice**

In recent years, a number of influential educational organizations have called for greater recognition of the role of experiential learning in supporting liberal learning. The Carnegie Corporation of New York has argued that experiential learning strengthens liberal learning by integrating "experience and application through academic work" (Barker, 2000, pp.6, 8), and has called for increased opportunities for experiential learning in undergraduate study. The Association of American Colleges and Universities, based, in part, on its belief that experiential learning can be an important source of liberal learning, has called for "...an end to the traditional and artificial distinctions that exist in the academy between liberal and practical education" (DiConti, 2004, p.170). My research findings support these positions. The reported capacity of experiential learning to bring about deeper and more complex levels of understanding and promote affective and ethical development underscores the value of experiential learning in supporting key goals of liberal education. Moreover, the consistency with which students noted how experiential learning engaged and motivated them strongly suggests that it incentivizes and promotes learning.

For such learning to be an effective source of liberal learning, however, my findings suggest that experiential learning must be structured and intentional. Students who found their experiential learning experiences most valuable with regard to the general education learning goals consistently cited the importance of having mentors with whom they could discuss their goals and progress, the opportunity to reflect upon their learning, and the opportunity to work with others. For internships and practica, this meant regular meetings with supervising faculty and mentors, journal writing and other kinds of reflective exercises, and the opportunity to interact with peers or those outside of the academic community. The least meaningful experiential learning opportunities were ones where students lacked

supervision or counsel, had no clear sense of what they were supposed to be achieving, and worked in isolation.

These findings underscore DiConti's (2004) position that for experiential learning to be most educative, it must be structured and have 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" (pp. 175-176).

The findings also suggest that experiential learning should be seen as a complement to other forms of learning, not a substitute. One of the consistent observations that students made about the value of experiential learning was how it reinforced other learning, most often classroom based learning in liberal arts classes or the major. Because of its capacity for complementing such learning, students consistently noted that it made such learning more meaningful and "real." But it was largely because experiential learning provided students with the opportunity to build on prior knowledge and skills that students found it so valuable. In recent years, many colleges and universities have begun to provide increased opportunities for experiential learning. The research findings argue strongly for an increase in such opportunities given the growing evidence that experiential learning supports not only learning in the major, but key goals of general education as well.

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