

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Relating Student Experience to Courses and the Curriculum

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Asking students to relate their personal experiences to the curriculum can actually enhance learning and further the outcomes of a liberal education rather than squander precious instructional time as many instructors often assume. 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 the case, then instructors need to provide students occasions to reflect on their own experiences through the lenses of their disciplines during classroom and study time.

Further, what we know about learning points to the initial state of learners--their prior knowledge and experience with the course material at hand--as the starting point of instruction. Effective instruction builds upon this experience deliberately because functionally individuals will interpret and incorporate new ideas through their existing frames of reference. And according to Kolb's well-known learning model (1984), individuals form abstract concepts and generalizations by reflecting on experience. These concepts then become working principles, the implications of which individuals test in experience and subsequently modify after further experience and reflection. Good instruction guides students consciously through this process.

Following are specific suggestions on how instructors can integrate

personal experiences and course material to promote student learning.

Planning Integrating students' personal experiences and course material begins in the planning stage as instructors articulate their goals and objectives for the course. Along with those related to course content, analytical skills, research methodologies and the like, critical reflection on personal experience through the discipline becomes another explicit goal of instruction and a desired student outcome. In designing the course, the instructor will select a variety of methods--some of which we describe below--to further this outcome.

Instructors also need to help students see the possible connections between their experience and the course material. Conceptualizing the course in terms of broad-based themes that run through an array of phenomena (including students' experiences and the course material) may help students see these connections. It will also provide them wider frames of reference for subsequent reflection.

Planning of this kind is easier, of course, if instructors know the students they teach. As they teach, instructors can explore students' experiences through personal data sheets, class discussion, and individual conferences. They might also keep abreast of student life and culture through campus newspapers, attendance at campus events, general reading, and informal conversations with students. As instructors come to know and understand the students in their classes better, they will be able to draw stronger and more relevant comparisons between students' experience and the curriculum.

Teaching Strategies A range of teaching strategies help students integrate their personal experiences and course material. By creating explicit opportunities for students to draw connections between their experience and course materials and then providing them with tools for reflection, instructors can help students internalize a habit of critical reflection. Well-chosen comparisons and analogies draw from students' immediate experience, ring true, and have cognitive utility. They can engender minor epiphanies on which deeper, more analytical understanding can grow. A good questioning strategy can lead students from raw and immediate personal experience to a

broader and more sophisticated understanding. Well-designed case studies are an effective way of linking experience and theory and giving theory immediacy. They can also help students understand their own experience, using the case study as a lens through which to view analogous situations they may encounter later. Journals provide a natural vehicle for reflection on the course material in light of students' experience. Entries can be structured or open-ended, both forms of which force students to engage more personally and directly with the course material and to consider its implications for themselves. Simulations and games draw students towards and into the course material, literally forcing them to experience it. Debriefing such experiences critically provides the analytical tools students will need to reflect upon their own experiences. Finally through experiential learning students engage in an actual work or field experience outside the confines of the classroom but as part of their regular coursework and then reflect upon it in a manner consistent with the discipline at hand.

These teaching strategies vary in the degree to which they incorporate actual student experience. Comparisons and analogies incorporate student experience indirectly by drawing comparisons between the course content and student experience or by asking students to do so. By contrast, in experiential learning students take part actively in an experience as a course requirement that the instructor consciously weaves into the course material. But whether the strategy involves a simulation, a case study, or an actual field activity, the strength of the strategy lies only partially in the nature of the experience itself. Even more important is the guidance and support provided to students for critical reflection on the experience. Using Kolb's model, reflection is the critical link between concrete experience and the formation of abstract concepts and generalization by which we order and regularize experience. As a result, instructors need to plan carefully reflective exercises that employ the methods of critical inquiry peculiar to their discipline. Through guided reflection of this sort, students learn how to learn from experience, not simply the particular classroom or field experience, but from any experience.

Evaluation If the ability to reflect critically on personal experience through the discipline is a desired outcome of instruction, teachers need to develop ways to evaluate this ability. Well-designed

assessment instruments provide opportunities for students to practice new skills and abilities and to enhance their learning. They also permit instructors to assess the effectiveness of instruction and the extent of student learning. Three major guidelines for evaluation described below insure the integrity of course planning and evaluation, increase the likelihood of student success on assignments, and provide consistent and fair assessment criteria:

- * Tie student assessment to specific course objectives.
- * Provide detailed assignments in writing that clearly specify your expectations.
- * Clearly specify in writing how the assignment will be evaluated at the time it is assigned.

These general principles apply to virtually all types of evaluation, but they are particularly important for assignments that explicitly require students to relate their experiences to the course material. Such assignments are apt to be nontraditional and hence unfamiliar to students. Unless structured properly, they may invite aimless confessionalism with little reference to critical inquiry in the discipline. As a result students will not have had the learning experience intended by the assignment, and instructors will be at a loss to evaluate completed assignments so different from their implicit expectations.

Following are two specific examples of assignments in which students must relate their own experiences to the course material:

Literature and Life Project. An instructor of an introductory course in contemporary literature specifies the following as one of her course goals: to see literature as participating in and dialoguing with a larger cultural system. To evaluate this goal she asks simply that students explore the extent to which the readings have affected them. In her written evaluation scheme, she describes carefully assignment options corresponding to conventional grade levels. For example, students electing the "C" option need only identify the impact a work of literature has on them, while those choosing the "A" option must not only identify their responses but analyze and act upon them. She also spells out the time and page requirements for each option.

Service Learning Project. In a labor economics course investigating the role of labor in the economy, students work for an organization that helps the unemployed find appropriate jobs. To assess several related knowledge, skills, attitude and values, and service objectives, students submit three assignments associated with this experience: an organizational profile; a journal in which students reflect upon and analyze their experience; and a final paper in which students relate their experiences in the organization to the concepts, models, and theories of labor economics. The instructor distributes evaluation criteria for each assignment.

Summary Frequently instructors 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, purposefully integrating student experience into courses and the curriculum can enhance the effectiveness of instruction. It can help students broaden their frames of reference and reflect critically on their experience, thereby furthering the broader outcomes of a liberal education.

Suggested Works to Consult

Hutchings, P., & Wutzdorff, A. (Eds.) (1988). *Knowing and doing: learning through experience*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Jackson, K. (Ed.) (1994). *Redesigning curricula: models of service learning syllabi*. Providence, RI: Campus Compact.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Walter, G.A., & Marks, S.E. (1981). *Experiential learning and change: theory design and practice*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.