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Effective Practice and Experiential Education

Abstract

The central challenge to educators in the liberal arts as in all areas of study is transfer of learning i.e. how can we design learning environments and instruction to that students will be able to use what they learn in appropriate new contexts? Alfred North Whitehead described this as the problem of ‘inert knowledge’ nearly a century ago and Dewey noted that instruction which helps students reproduce what is studied on exams might not produce the depth of understanding that allows for recognizing the relevance of what is known to a particular situation and the ability to apply it. Knowledge that is not conditionalized (i.e. in which the learner does not know when where and why it is to be used) is inert.

Keywords

service-learning, experiential education

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Clark/AAC&U Conference on Liberal Education and Effective Practice

Effective Practice and Experiential Education

Janet Eyler

The central challenge to educators in the liberal arts as in all areas of study is transfer of learning i.e. how can we design learning environments and instruction so that students will be able to use what they learn in appropriate new contexts? Alfred North Whitehead described this as the problem of 'inert knowledge' nearly a century ago and Dewey noted that instruction which helps students reproduce what is studied on exams might not produce the depth of understanding that allows for recognizing the relevance of what is known to a particular situation and the ability to apply it. Knowledge that is not conditionalized (i.e. in which the learner does not know when where and why it is to be used) is inert.

To achieve such goals of a liberal arts education as effective citizenship participation and engagement in life long learning, requires the capacity to perceive and address ill structured problems, tolerate ambiguity, make warranted judgments and act while continuously seeking and refining further information. As Schwartz and Bransford have noted in their research, preparation for future learning is a critical element of transfer and ultimately more important than immediate application of specific knowledge. These capabilities are not simply a function of information and skills but also personal and intellectual capabilities, which are not now generally attained before college graduation.

This lack of ability to transfer may result from the mismatch between learning in the classroom and the learning that occurs outside of school. In the workplace or in addressing community issues learning often occurs collaboratively, is organized around concrete situations, makes use of tools and resources and is iterative, whereas classroom based learning often involves decontextualized knowledge, manipulation of abstract symbols and highly individual efforts. Knowledge in the classroom tends to be compartmentalized into disciplines, whereas in use in the community or workplace it tends to be organized around problems or domains of practice. Classroom learning, even when attempts are made to incorporate problem based and similar experiential methods does not succeed in engaging students in ways that lead to effective later use of the material. Forms of experiential learning that engage students in projects or problems in the workplace or community help students link learning to action and also facilitate intellectual abilities that contribute to effective participation.

It is noteworthy that when learning really counts, when programs are serious about students' effective use of what they are learning, that they often incorporate field based components. Doctors, nurses, teachers and those preparing for many other professions have internships or clinical rotations or practice teaching. The increased use of problem based learning as well as capstone projects that asks future engineers or business leaders to apply what they are learning acknowledges the importance of this process. We know that the only way to assure that knowledge is used and that students become thoughtful practitioners is to offer numerous opportunities in multiple settings to practice and reflect on what is learned.

While this has been a commonplace in vocationally or professionally oriented programs, field based pedagogies such as cooperative education, internships and service-learning have struggled to gain legitimacy in the liberal arts. There has been resistance to what many believe is experience that while valuable should be pursued on students' 'own time' or as an adjunct to their liberal education and not as an integral part of it. This may arise from concern that applied experience is vocational or from a rejection of the constructivist foundations of experiential learning.

Much of the literature on cooperative education and internships even in liberal arts programs focuses on its utility in connecting students to job opportunity. While these programs are often touted as ways of deepening understanding of subject matter, there is evidence that the experiences that students have are often not connected to the learning goals of the programs in a systematic way. Some of this gap occurs because work is not closely tied to the academic program; some from the lack of effective supervision by faculty; some seems to result from the fact that students are not continuously engaged in making the intellectual connections.

The goals of service-learning are more likely to be explicitly academic rather than career oriented and more of the research addresses academic outcomes including cognitive development. This literature has yielded some clear implications for the design of effective programs; quality does matter. Field based programs including practica, internships and service-learning have a place in helping students achieve the goals of the liberal arts but it is apparently rare that they are designed or implemented to do so.

In a well designed and run program, the developmental processes that occur when students engage in real work as part of their academic studies mirrors the outcomes that lead to effective transfer. When students have a personal stake in a project that will have an effect on people's lives or know that their work will be used, this personal engagement stokes genuine intellectual curiosity; confronting experiences that challenge assumptions provokes intellectual development. Repeated opportunities to be engaged with community and the use of field-based capstones help students consolidate this growth. Central to effective field based experiential programs is challenging and continuous reflection. Mere experience does not necessarily lead to insight, it is the making sense of that experience and connecting it to knowledge and experiences already acquired that leads to learning. Characteristics associated with effective programs include:

- Work or service related closely to academic goals of the course or program
- important responsibility for the student
- an academic supervisor or instructor who pays close attention to the students' work in the field
- site supervisors who are aware of learning goals and partner with the academic supervisor
- continuous well structured reflection opportunities for students to help them link experience and learning.

Selected Readings

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