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## Trading places: Learning from the student perspective

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## **Trading Places: Learning From The Student Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT:** A unique opportunity exists within Michigan State University for undergraduates to be valued members of a community of student and faculty scholars dedicated to lifelong learning. With the motto, “college is a journey, not a guided tour,” the Bailey Scholars Program encourages students to take charge of their learning, with plenty of assistance and resources available. The program offers students a chance to tailor their education or degree toward particular interests. Bailey provides a comfortable environment to learn however is appropriate for the topic, creating a space where scholars become interdependent and gain a sense of community. Many of the core classes involve field trips, guest speakers, projects, and discussions developed by the students. Along with the actual learning experiences, the student scholars within a class determine assessment and evaluation. Classes are generally small, bringing students and conveners together at a round table. In the first of three core classes, there is a chance for student conveners to facilitate in the course. The role of a student convener is similar to that of faculty conveners. Student conveners experience the ideal practice of peer leadership; the confidence gained from being a valued member of the convener community can encourage student scholars to take the lead and initiate ideas and conversation without dominating class dynamics.

### INTRODUCTION

The Bailey Scholars Program is a specialization in connected learning offered to undergraduate students in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University. The program, however, is much more than a schedule of required courses to complete for recognition on a diploma. Bailey is a community of faculty and student scholars dedicated to life-long learning. There are many opportunities for scholars

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to be engaged members of Bailey including reading circles, Wednesday lunch discussions, share nights, special events, as well as Bailey core classes. The specialization consists of three core classes, ANR 210, ANR 310, and ANR 410. These courses are taken in sequence throughout a student's learning journey. ANR 210 is an introductory course, taken upon entering the program, and ANR 410 is the capstone course, taken in the last semester before graduation. Bailey classes are unlike many traditional college courses in that students shape the entire syllabus based on group dynamics and particular interests so that every class is unique. Faculty members facilitate learning as class conveners, guiding, but not directing the course. ANR 210 includes a role for student co-conveners. For an overview of the Bailey Scholars Program, see Tagg (2003).

#### CREATION OF THE STUDENT CONVENER ROLE

When any first official ANR 210: Foundations in Connected Learning class meets, there is an apparent awkwardness amongst faculty and students alike. Implementing the concept of self-directed learning while throwing out traditional hierarchical roles proves to be a challenge for all co-learners. The student convener position was created as a balance between faculty and student scholars. Student conveners bring the experience of at least one core Bailey course and act as a resource to new student scholars. The availability of this resource in the classroom setting directly increases the learners' comfort level by bridging the gap between students and faculty on a daily basis. The positive effect that a student convener has on an ANR 210 class help all co-learners to participate and develop their learning together in a respectful environment.

#### LEARNING AS A STUDENT CONVENER

Just as every individual student's learning is never the same as another's, every student convener learns and grows in different ways with each class. Every student convener has completed at least one required Bailey course. In that course, the student was new to the program and learning how to find his or her own voice amongst a class of peers facing each other around a circle of tables. In general, the student started as a newcomer at the 'periphery' of the learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In this class, the student was emerging out of the traditional learning box and into a new environment.

As a convener, a level of comfort within this setting has been developed, yet, when the student becomes a convener it is no longer his/her role to be an active voice. A convener must learn to sit back and watch the new students' transformations as they work through the challenges of being in control of their own learning. It is not the convener's role to create the process, but to guide it. As a convener, the student learns to become more sensitive and perceptive to classroom dynamics. Over a period of time, the student convener becomes more comfortable withholding comments and watching a dialogue between new scholars unfold without giving in to the burning desire to contribute comments that may influence the developing interactions. The student convener learns that the nuances of speech affect how listening ears process the speaker's message. As a

learning tool, it is the convener's job to ask questions that keep new scholars within the scope of the topic being discussed without impressing upon them personal opinion. This is an extremely difficult skill to learn when transforming from a former new scholar whose voice was always encouraged to be heard.

Student conveners experience firsthand how learning unfolds. By sitting back, observing, and absorbing all that is happening around, the convener learns how his/her own experience in self-directed learning influences and shapes his/her learning journey.

## BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

Student and faculty conveners work to smooth the transition into the Bailey style of self-directed learning. Many standard undergraduate classes consist of a professor lecturing, with notes provided on a blackboard, or with an overhead projector or PowerPoint presentation. The students sit in their desks, and take notes. There is no dialogue or discussion. The students may ask questions for clarification, but that is as far as it goes. The faculty members are "learning directors." This sets boundaries on student learning.

A more connected way to approach education is when the faculty members are "learning facilitators." This connected learning approach lacks the boundaries set in place by the "top-down" teaching methods. Lave and Wenger (2003) call this type of learning "legitimate peripheral participation." From their research, they describe learners as "apprentices" who participate within a community of practitioners, gradually moving toward more engaged, full participation in all aspects of that community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" describes the 'relations between newcomers and old-timers...It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 2003: 29).

In the Bailey Community, all members are co-learners, and boundaries between "faculty" and "student" are blurred. "We know that one of the most important things to be learned in life is the ability to work collaboratively with others in a team setting" (Fear et al. 1998). Collaborative learning is how Bailey courses are so different from other courses offered. This is when two or more persons come together as equals and partners to envision, organize, and offer active and relevant learning experiences for others. As Kris Gerulski, Bailey student, states:

As students in the program, we're placed in a position of impact and opinion as opposed to the stereotypical and limited position of observance and examination. For the first time in nearly all of our college careers, we as students of Bailey, are able to work jointly with our faculty and mentors in an atmosphere less teacher/student and more geared towards a community of learning. Being allowed to partake in curriculum planning, organizing session agendas, and initiating class discussion are just a few of the aspects that make the program so rewarding to its students. This gives you the idea behind why we call ourselves a community of learning as opposed to a simple 'classroom.'" (Fear et al. 1998).

## INCORPORATING BAILEY STYLE INTO OTHER COURSES

The Bailey model for student influence in the creation of their learning journey can be applied to many other aspects of the undergraduate experience. Many degree-specific classes integrate group projects into their curriculum, emphasizing the importance of enhancing skills such as teamwork, cooperation, leadership, task handling, and professionalism. This provides students the chance to experience their influence over the material they are learning, and the mode through which they learn. Considering natural resource management, both the “art” and “science” are important dimensions of decision-making. The “science” is already a major part of a natural resource degree. However, the “art” is where students can utilize other skills and get involved in issues pertaining to their degree interests. Bailey classes encompass many different agriculture and natural resources degrees, so core course topics are initially undefined. Students are able to develop the entire class syllabus based on group dynamics and interests. However, since this is not always a viable option in single degree programs, it is critical to find alternative means for students to express themselves as learners.

Models like self-directed learning can be implemented into courses by allowing students to choose topics or projects that hold their interest yet are related, however loosely, to the main course objectives. Rather than providing all the information, conveners ask questions to get students involved in the subject, allowing them to begin inquiring on their own and pursuing issues further. In Bailey classes, students are often interested in bringing speakers into class or going on field trips to learn about an issue. Students will take responsibility for finding and contacting the people or resources from whom they want to learn. This has been very effective in directly involving students in their learning, because they determine the venue for learning.

Bailey courses, especially ANR 210, are often consumed for several class periods by the issues surrounding evaluation and assessment. In a Bailey class, students are encouraged to find a system of grading that suits their learning. Faculty have the final say in grades, however, students determine what they want to be evaluated on and how to justify their learning. When students discuss ideas on evaluation, varying issues are raised ranging from linear to lateral models of evaluation. When students have a chance to critically analyze how to justify their learning, they have evaluated what they find most important in a class. Often, issues of responsibility and reliability are addressed, as well as participation and involvement. Some classes decide on a final product such as a paper or presentation, while others choose to plan events to share their learning with the broader community. Whatever the method, having some influence in a student’s evaluation is valuable to the students learning in that they are again directly involved.

## CONCLUSION

Education is not something that happens to someone; it is something someone does. Education does not begin when class starts, nor does it end with a Bachelors degree or a Ph.D. One must be open and willing to learn in order to become educated. It is a decision to make and a continuing process. If someone stops learning upon receiving their degree, they have cut off many opportunities to accelerate in their field of study or line of work. However, with continual learning and evaluation, personal and professional growth is enhanced. Self-directed learning, learning in-community and many other ideas from the Bailey Scholars Program have proved to be beneficial for students and faculty alike.

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