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Experiential learning applied to a residential life training program

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Experiential learning applied to a residential life training program

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe and justify a course project for a resident assistant course. Specifically, the project addresses the important role Resident Assistants play in developing community. To develop a project that was both practical and intellectually stimulating to students, as well as beneficial to the department, Kolb's (1981, 1984) experiential learning model was used as a conceptual framework.

Kolb's theory proposes that students learn at their optimal level when they can experience learning in many different ways. Based on this theory, the project is designed to engage each student in active learning while developing the skills they will utilize when they begin their responsibilities as a Resident Assistant.

The first part of the paper draws from the literature of both academic and student affairs on the changing philosophies of teaching and learning and on the importance of learning through a variety of means. The second section describes the project. Third and finally, the merits and limitations of the course project are described.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPLIED TO A
RESIDENTIAL LIFE TRAINING PROGRAM

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

by

Bobbie J. Coons-Boettcher
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Bobbie J. Coons-Boettcher

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Residential Life Training Program

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of
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Date Approved

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Advisor/Director of Research Paper

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Many colleges and universities today require Resident Assistants to participate in a course that provides some of the basic information they need to become successful on the job. Topics covered in the course usually include, but are not limited to, student development theory, the different roles of the resident assistant, residence hall philosophy, interpersonal communications, teamwork, and community development. The Resident Assistant position is the foundation of any residence hall program and often regarded as one of the most difficult jobs taken by undergraduate students today. Consequently, preparation, through coursework, is vitally important for successful community development (Bliming, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to describe and justify a course project for a resident assistant course. Specifically, the project addresses the important role Resident Assistants play in developing community. To develop a project that was both practical and intellectually stimulating to students, as well as beneficial to the department, Kolb's (1981, 1984) experiential learning model was used as a conceptual framework. Kolb's theory proposes that students learn at their optimal level when they can experience learning in many different ways. Based on this theory, the project is designed to engage each student in active learning while developing the skills they will utilize when they begin their responsibilities as a Resident Assistant. The first part of the paper draws from the literature of both

academic and student affairs on the changing philosophies of teaching and learning and on the importance of learning through a variety of means. The second section describes the project. Third and finally, the merits and limitations of the course project are described.

As each housing program has unique needs, this project is not a one size fits all key to teaching Resident Assistants about community development. Rather, it is meant to be used and modified to fit the specific needs of individual departments.

A holistic philosophy of education has been argued for many years as the key to quality learning. At the beginning of the American higher educational system this philosophy was addressed through the organizational structure of each institution. Colleges were residential, meaning that students lived together in campus dormitories with faculty members. This structure promoted student-faculty engagement and learning, at all times of the day. Today, colleges and universities have a different face. In comparison to the early scholar, students today often live off campus, work full or part time jobs, and are significantly more diverse (academically, economically, socially, racially, and sexually). This new makeup of higher education creates many challenges to educators. Although the structure of the modern college is different from its predecessors, a pendulum swinging from extensive involvement (the concept of *in loco parentis*) in the lives

of the colleges students to little or no involvement in student's lives, is perhaps now swinging to a middle ground where learning is emphasized in all areas of the institution.

The realization that learning can occur in many venues of the institution did take place over night. While colleges and universities are seen as places where new ideas and new ways of thinking are created, change within its own structure usually occurs very slowly. Educational assessment, the process of measuring performance in regards to mission, goals and objectives, other institutions, and government guidelines, developed to assist educators focus on how to improve the quality of education and provide answers to the many constituencies involved in the process.

History has shown that college and universities traditionally have dedicated their main efforts to the development of strong academic programs while more slowly developing quality student affairs programs. In recent years, scholars and practitioners have promoted "seamless learning environments" where academic and non-academic activities interact and complement each other (Kuh, 1996). This seamless environment suggests that there should be a blending of class and out-of-class activities where students are encouraged, and in many cases formally directed, to draw upon their life experiences and use what they learn in

real life. Kuh also asserts that to have a true, and successful, seamless learning environment each institution must agree to support the philosophy.

Literature Review

The historic division between the worlds of student services and academia is, by some accounts, being broken down by scholars like Love and Love. Love and Love (1995) talk about this division when they state: “We see two distinct, though related, divisions that have developed in higher education: the splitting of emotional elements from the intellectual development, and division of the social from the cognitive element of learning.” (p. 9). They argue that this separation (the intellectual from the social) has hurt the educational potential of colleges and universities. Love and Love attribute this loss, in part, to the disparity of faculty roles. These roles--research, teaching, and service--often take faculty members out of the way of important social development opportunities. Until recently, student affairs professionals have dealt with this aspect of higher education.

Other researchers, advocating for the same outcome, use a different argument: “Colleges and universities must become more productive by making better use of existing resources so that students can learn more without institutions spending more” (Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994, p. 3; see also Wingspread Group, 1993). These two arguments suggest that educational

outcomes could be improved by acknowledging that learning occurs in many different ways and in a variety of locations.

Higher education scholars have published many works in support of integrative teaching and learning experiences. Robert Barr and John Tagg write about this new philosophy as they categorize two differing educational paradigms, the instructional and the learning. The goal of the instructional paradigm, according to Barr and Tagg, is to have the teacher pass information on to the students whereas the learning paradigm sets up an environment where everyone (including the instructor) learns. In a learning environment, “even the institution itself is a learner” (Barr & Tagg, 1994, p. 14).

Also supporting the instructional paradigm, Martin Bickman (1994) writes:

Cognitive scientists are arguing for new conceptions of learning, emphasizing that knowledge is not passed intact from a knower to a learner, but is actively constructed by learners who draw on their previous knowledge base in ways that expand their knowledge and influence subsequent learning. (p. 50)

His main concept, active learning, involves active listening, skill development, higher-order thinking, student engagement, and value exploration.

Other research has produced new theory and practice in higher education.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) developed the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (see Appendix A). These principles are meant to be used as a guideline for faculty to maximize student learning. They

encourage interaction between faculty and students, cooperation among students, the utilization of active learning techniques, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and recognition and respect to different talents and ways of learning.

While researchers have been investigating ways in which students learn, student affairs professionals have been working on ways to create better learning environments. In reviewing the literature, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996) state: “in virtually all cases where students’ out-of-class experiences were found to enhance academic or cognitive learning, those experiences required, or at least afforded opportunities for, active student involvement.” (p. 158).

In response to the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” professionals in student affairs have created their own principles for good practice (Appendix B). Many of the principles follow the “Seven Principles” of Chickering and Gamson, indicating that there is a basis for building bridges between the academic and student affairs sides of higher education. The “Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs” state that student affairs professionals should: encourage students to learn actively, help them develop ethical values and standards, set high expectations for student learning, use resources necessary to evaluate and improve performance, use those resources wisely, create partnerships with others in higher education to advance student learning, and build healthy communities.

The greatest similarity between the research literature in academic and student affairs is the concept of “active learning.” In both arenas active learning is the key to quality learning in higher education. This similarity indicates a need for educational links between academics and student affairs experiences, links that incorporate active learning throughout.

Project Description

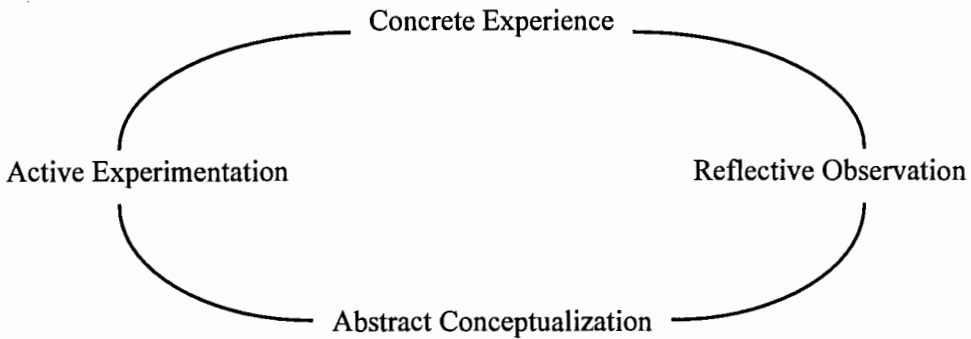
In response to the findings of the literature which support the growing attention dedicated towards linking living and learning through active learning strategies, I developed a course project for a Resident Assistant course. The project is based on David A. Kolb’s experiential learning theory. Kolb’s theory proposes that learning is best achieved when learners are actively engaged in the process of their own learning. He describes four stages (see Figure 1) in which the most successful learning experiences occur. These stages are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

The first stage, *concrete experience*, refers to a learner who is introduced to new information through experiencing the information, often through the senses. This first experience to the information can happen through reading assignments or immersion into material where they can learn it by doing specific tasks (laboratories, simulations/games, or case studies). These exercises

encourage the learners to “involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in [the] new experiences” (Kolb, 1981, p. 154).

Figure 1

Kolb's Experimental Learning Model



Adapted from Svinicki and Dixon, 1987

Reflective observation, the second stage, refers to the process of taking the information processed in the first stage and relating it to the student's prior educational base. This can be accomplished by asking students to write about their feelings and thoughts on the topic. Other strategies used to promote learning at this stage might include class discussions and brainstorming sessions.

Abstract conceptualization is the stage that takes reflective observation a step further. In this stage learners actually develop their own theory and/or framework which helps them more fully understand the new information. Activities which could promote growth in this stage include: lectures, projects, papers, and model building.

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The final stage, *active experimentation*, tests the knowledge that students have learned in the prior three stages. Student actively tests the information which they have experienced, reflected upon, and conceptualized (through assignments which are designed specifically to make the learner demonstrate the skills they acquired through the proces.) The testing may be done in the laboratory, through research projects, simulations, or long-term field work.

The course project which I developed using Kolb's theory (Appendix C) consists of many different learning activities. The first part of the project, addressing the concrete operations stage, consists of three exercises. Students are first asked to read portions of the assigned text and then compare what they have read with their real-life experiences as it relates to the topic. Second, the class is asked to think about the best community in which they have been a part. These two exercises are intended to begin the process of referring back to their previous experiences. The third component of this stage is the viewing of a documentary that illustrates a floor's first year experience.

The three concrete experiences blend into the reflective observation stage. This second part has two separate components which address students' feelings and thoughts about the subject via group discussion. Group discussion provides

students with many different points of view concerning the same material and promotes a broader understanding of that same material. The second assignment, a composition of a three-page essay, asks the student to reflect upon the information they read in the texts, the documentary, their experiences, and the group discussion.

The third part of the project, abstract conceptualization, is composed largely of group work. The first part of the section asks each group to pick one of two case studies (Appendixes D and E) and to analyze the case using either a psychosocial or a cognitive student development model. By this point in the term, the class has already discussed William Perry's cognitive development model and Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors of psychosocial development. The second component of this part of the project requires students to write a longer paper (three to five pages) which addresses their feelings and thoughts about one of the two case studies. To write this paper they are instructed to use what they have learned from the group discussion and self study of the case in relation to either Chickering and Reisser's or Perry's theory.

In the final part of this project, the active experimentation stage, students are required to create a game plan or specific strategy that addresses issues raised in one of the two case studies. In a presentation format, the group discusses their case and then outlines the means by which they would handle the situation or

avoid the problems faced by the Resident Assistants. At the end of the presentation, other classmates have the chance to ask questions and give feedback regarding the strategies the group has recommended.

The final component of this active experimentation section is a meeting at the end of their first semester. This meeting is designed to give everyone the opportunity to discuss their experiences on the job. At this point the class will revisit the strategies they created in their class project and talk about their successes and challenges in implementing their strategies. In addition to this meeting being a support net for the Resident Assistants, knowing that the plans they develop in class will actually be assessed will hopefully get more motivation and better ideas from each student as they plan their strategies.

Strengths and Weaknesses

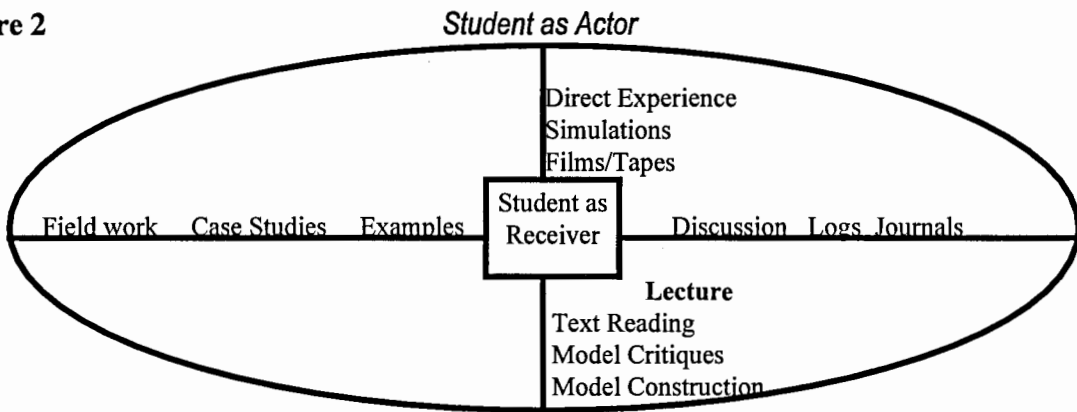
This course project possesses many strengths. First, the project uses all four stages of Kolb's experiential learning model. The project begins with a concrete experience (the assigned readings), and continues with the essay, a reflective observation, about an experience with a good community environment. It addresses the third stage, abstract conceptualization, as each group develops its own game plan for developing community. Finally, it covers active experimentation throughout the semester and as the class reconvenes to compare experiences.

Secondly, this project incorporates active learning strategies that involve students in their own learning while, at the same time, being careful not to exclude learners who perform the best with more passive techniques. Svinicki and Dixon (1987) developed a model of student involvement that describes such activities and illustrates them on a continuum (Figure 2). At one end of the continuum activities that involve the 'student as actor' are listed. These activities include: field work and model building, and involve the student in their learning. Comparing this pole to Kolb's model, concrete experiences and active participation are addressed through these activities. At the other end of the continuum, the 'student as receiver' is described. On this pole passive activities such as lectures and reflective writing are involved in learning. Kolb's reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages would apply. This particular course project incorporates activities that range from recall of experience, case studies, and paper composition. The range of activities suggests acknowledging that each student learns differently.

The project also incorporates different student learning techniques. These learning techniques address visual, audio, and kinesthetic tendencies. Further, the different techniques are spaced throughout the project so that there are more techniques at work. For example, in the third part of the model, students are split

into groups which discuss the material and case study. To tie into that group work, each student individually composes their own essay incorporating the ideas they acquired throughout the process. In particular, audial learners, who learn well when they hear the content and are able to talk about their learning, will do well in

Figure 2



Adapted from Svinicki and Dixon, 1987

the group discussions. Visual learners, who have the tendency to learn better when they can see the information, will do well with the video documentary, presentations, and text readings.

Finally, this project gets students working together. This accomplishes two goals. First, they acquire specific knowledge and learn about resources available to them as they begin their job. The second goal is teamwork. The group work will force students to work together and to realize that they are not Resident Assistants alone.

This project is not without its limitations. First, this is an extensive project that requires a lot of time, time that could be spent on other equally important topics. If most of the energy of the class is used by this one project, other units of the class may suffer.

Secondly, students who come to institutions with diverse learning styles means that the instructor must know how to teach to each style. This is not an easy task; just as a student may not learn as well using one particular style, the instructor may not teach in a particular style very well.

A final limitation of this project is its limited repertoire of case studies. These particular case studies were chosen because they address community development challenges and because they could spark quality discussions. However, additional case studies would help students attain an appreciation for student development theory and how it plays into the formation and stability of their community.

This research paper began by reviewing some of the literature discussing the need of linking in and out-of-class learning together throughout higher education. The literature has shown that researchers and practitioners are now moving towards a more integrated system of teaching their students. While the research reviewed in this paper discusses the important role of faculty and administrative staff towards this goal, I have described a project in a resident

assistant course where students learn how to form a positive floor community. As each student learns how to become an effective Resident Assistant, they become teachers for the students they will serve.

Appendix A

7 Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

- Encourages contacts between students and faculty,
- Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
- Uses active learning techniques,
- Gives prompt feedback,
- Emphasizes time on task,
- Communicates high expectations,
- Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. (1987, March). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin*, 3-7.

Appendix B

Principles of Good Practice For Student Affairs

Engages students in active learning.

Helps students develop coherent values and ethical standards.

Sets and communicates high expectations for students learning.

Uses systematic inquiry to improve student and institutional performance.

Uses resources effectively to achieve institutional mission and goals.

Forges educational partnerships that advance student learning.

Builds supportive and inclusive communities.

Principles of good practice for student affairs: Statement and inventories. (1997)
[Brochure] . ACPA & NASPA: Author.

Appendix C

Residence Life 101 Fall 1998

Course Project

“Community Development”

The purpose of this project is for the class to work individually and together in groups to learn about and develop a positive floor community. Through this process you as the learner will find many benefits such as; 1) acquiring knowledge about community development strategies, college student development, and resources available to assist community development on campus; 2) providing an opportunity to get to know each of your fellow staff members; and 3) thinking about community development proactively.

Project Responsibilities

Stage I

Concrete Experience

- reading assignments

-Resident Assistant Handbook section on community development

-Chapter 18 (pp. 471-481) in The Resident Assistant

-Case Studies

-Watch Documentary “Frosh”

Stage II

Reflective Observation

- discussions and essay writing

-With your group, discuss your feelings about the readings and experiences in a positive, and negative community.

-Write a three page essay describing your own feelings and thoughts about the readings and your own experiences being a part of a good and bad community.

Stage III

Abstract Conceptualization

- group work

-Together with your group, choose one of the case studies and analyze the situation. Compare them to one of the two student development models we discussed earlier in the class (Chickering and Reisser’s 7 Vectors of Development or William Perry’s Theory of Cognitive Student Development).

Stage IV

Active Experimentation

- game plan

-Create a three page “game plan” in which your team chooses one case study and answers the questions provided. Your group will then compose a plan in which you (the group as a whole) are the Resident Assistant on the floor. State how you would improve the situation and how you would

have avoided negative circumstances from the beginning. This report should include the resources you will need to carry out your plan.

-Together with your group present a 5-10 minute presentation about your game plan to the class. After you present the class will have the opportunity to ask you questions about your ideas and offer suggestions to improve upon your ideas.

-At the end of the first semester the class will reconvene in a casual setting where we will talk about how each plan went. At this point we will have the chance to talk about our successes and challenges that each of you faced as you implemented your plan on your floor.

Appendix D

Case Study 1

Rita was having a difficult time getting the students on her floor to interact with each other. About 40 women lived on her floor; half were residents last year and half were now freshmen. The returning students were grouped together in three clusters near the hall bathrooms. The new students were scattered about the hall and formed separate little pockets. By the end of the fall semester, Rita had five different groups of eight women each on her floor. All of the women seemed reasonably satisfied. There was occasionally some tension between a group of returning students at one end of the hall and some of the new students at the other end of the hall, but it was usually nothing serious.

None of the women on the floor know all of the other students on the floor. Even Rita had a hard time remembering the names of all of her residents. At the two floor meetings she held in the fall semester, the students were disinterested in having any social functions. Most of the returning women were involved with activities and jobs outside of the residence hall, and most of the new students were pledging a sorority and did not have time to for any floor functions.

Rita met her programming requirement with two programs; one on sex education and one on drug education. Both were good programs, but poorly attended.

Appendix E

Case Study 2

Oumar was the RA on the twelfth floor of a sixteen story high rise residence hall. His 40 residents were all freshmen or transfer students. The building was constructed like a "V." He had 20 residents down each corridor, and his room was located at the junction of the two corridors. There were two flag football teams from his floor. One team called themselves 12 North and was composed of the students from the North corridor. The other team was called 12 South and was composed of the students from the South corridor.

The teams were in the same intramural league, and one evening after dinner they played a game of flag football. A fight broke out at the game and both teams were suspended from participation in intramural football for that semester. By the time the students returned to the residence hall, tempers were running high.

Oumar found several students standing in front on the elevator yelling at one another and making threats. During the week that followed, students who were on 12 South had water dumped under their doors twice, glue put in the locks of the doors in that corridor, and the restroom at their end of the hall "trashed" with paper and broken beer bottles.

Students on 12 North were not spared destruction. For every act of vandalism that occurred in the South Corridor, there was retaliation. If two door locks were filled with glue in the South corridor, the students from 12 South would see to it that there were at least three filled with glue in the North corridor as retaliation. The fire alarm pull station had been pulled on several occasions at both ends of the floor.

The students from 12 South took to wearing T-shirts that showed a rebel flag inscribed with "12 South." Not to be outdone, the students on 12 North had their own T-shirts designed showing the American flag and bearing the inscription "12 North."

Oumar tried to catch the students responsible by sitting up all night, but was not successful. It was apparent that the whole thing had become a game, and each corridor was out to defeat the other by besting them in acts of vandalism. On two occasions, someone had jammed his door shut by placing pennies against the lock so that he could not open the door, and on several occasions water was dumped under his door. Oumar tried to find out who was responsible, but no one would tell him. The only information he would receive was allegations about how one group or the other did this or that. Students on each corridor were very close with the men from their corridor; but, the two groups of students disliked each other, and neither group liked Oumar or the hall director.

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