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Are Experiential Learning Programs Effective?

Dan Conrad
Diane Hedin

Experiential learning programs have been recommended by major commissions for years, but no one until now has attempted to investigate the claims of such programs. The authors, who co-direct the Evaluation of Experiential Learning Project, report here their early findings and describe what lies ahead.

WHERE CAN ONE LEARN to get things done and to work with others, to solve problems, to accept the consequences of one's actions, to gather and analyze information, to become more open to new experiences, to feel and act like a useful member of the community, to develop greater self-esteem, to become more self-motivated, and to be more concerned about others?

Where are these taught or learned in the secondary school curriculum? According to 4,000 students in some 20 public, private, and parochial school systems across the country, they are taught and learned in experiential programs.

This report of early research is one of several by the Evaluation of Experiential Learning Project, a major effort co-sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of Independent Schools, and the National Catholic Education Association

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The purpose of this article is to describe the evaluation effort, to describe its early evaluation results, and to describe the educational practice being studied.

At the heart of the project is its "Panel of Practitioners," teachers and administrators from 20 diverse school systems from Beverly Hills, Calif., to Newark, N.J.¹ With the assistance of seasoned educational evaluators like Ralph Tyler, they are responsible for defining the issues to be studied, for helping select and develop instruments, for implementing the design, for helping interpret the data collected—and for keeping the whole study practical, understandable, and applicable to everyday life in schools.

In June 1978, at the Spring Hill Conference Center in Wayzata, Minn., the panel examined the data collected during the study's pilot phase. They admit to being surprised, even overwhelmed, by what they found. The biggest surprises were how very positively both teachers and students rate their experiential programs, the significance of the things they report being learned in them, and the extraordinary level of agreement between students and teachers about these program outcomes.

Furthermore, the findings held constant across the broad range of programs represented in the study (internships, volunteer service, political action, outdoor adventure, etc.)² and for extremely diverse schools and student populations throughout the country.

Early Evaluation Procedures and Results

The first evaluation effort of the project was to survey people who direct experiential programs. In January 1978, they were asked what they could most confidently claim to be the actual effects of experiential programs on students. They were asked not what they believed *should* happen, but what they had *directly* experienced, seen, and heard. The result represents

1. Schools included in the Project are: *Independent*: Dana Hall School, Wellesley, Mass.; Francis W. Parker School, Chicago, Ill.; Carolina Friends School, Durham, N.C.; Duluth Cathedral High School, Duluth, Minn.; *Parochial*: St. Benedict's Preparatory School, Newark, N.J.; Bellarmine High School, Tacoma, Wash.; Ward High School, Kansas City, Kans.; *Public*: Eisenhower High School, Hopkins, Minn.; Mitchell High School, Colorado Springs, Colo.; Minneapolis (Minn.) Public Schools; Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Pittsburgh; St. Paul (Minn.) Open School; South Brunswick High School, Monmouth Junction, N.J.; Rochester, Minnesota Public Schools; Bartram School of Human Services, Philadelphia, Pa.; Beverly Hills (Calif.) High School; Ridgewood High School, Norridge, Ill.; Kirkwood High School, Kirkwood, Mo.; North Central High School, Indianapolis, Ind.

2. The study encompasses virtually all forms of what is termed experiential education with the notable exception of work-related or vocational programs.

an important study in itself, being a report of "concerned observers" looking critically, if not disinterestedly, at experiential education.

Among the vast array of observed effects were 24 which appeared with amazing regularity. Together, they comprise an imposing list of outcomes which schools everywhere hope to achieve, but less often do (or even dare to claim): improved self-esteem, learning responsibility, learning to solve real-life problems, etc. (see Table 1). Given the current level of pessimism in American education, it is encouraging, even startling, to see such confidence about the effects which at least one educational practice seems to be having.

This original survey set the stage for the next and more critical step in the evaluation process. Believing that the consumers of a "product" are usually more reliable judges of its value than its producers or salespersons, we presented in the spring of 1978 this list of observed effects to all the students in each of the programs. The students who were informed that the list represented what some people had said might be the effects of experiential programs were asked: "Which, if any, of these things have you personally learned or gained from the activities in your own experiential program?"

The researchers knew from previous studies and their own experience that students' perceptions of the purposes of a course are often considerably different from and their evaluations less effusive than those of their teachers. Therefore, they expected not more than a 50 percent level of agreement between teachers and students on the effects of the programs. In fact, however, only one item, "to become a more effective consumer," (46%) failed to meet the criteria, but it was a deliberate emphasis in only two of the programs surveyed.

More than half (14) of the items achieved an average agreement level of over 80 percent across all programs. These items are the ones listed in the opening paragraph of this article, plus "learning responsibility to the group or class," "learning responsibility for my own life," "gaining more realistic attitudes toward other people," "increased knowledge of community organizations," and "risk-taking—openness to new experiences." (See Table 1.)

Each of the other items, such as learning communication skills, learning about community problems and resources, learning about careers, etc., received 80 to 100 percent agreement in those programs where they were a deliberate emphasis. Apparently with good reason, the participants in these experiential programs think they are pursuing something worthwhile in education.

Not only is there substantial agreement between students and teachers about what is learned in experience-based programs, but community people who supervise the students, ranging from free clinic counselors to

TABLE 1
What Students Learn in Experiential Learning
Composite Profile of 20 Experiential Programs (N = 4,000)

Item (in rank order)	Percentage of Responses		
	Agree*	Disagree*	Don't Know
1. Concern for fellow human beings	93%	4%	3%
2. Ability to get things done and to work smoothly with others	93	4	3
3. Realistic attitudes toward other people such as the elderly, handicapped, or government officials	88	4	8
4. Self-motivation to learn, participate, achieve	88	7	5
5. Self-concept (sense of confidence, sense of competence, self-awareness)	88	7	5
6. Responsibility to the group or class	86	3	11
7. Risk-taking—openness to new experiences	86	7	8
8. Sense of usefulness in relation to the community	86	8	6
9. Problem-solving	86	9	5
10. Risk-taking—being assertive and independent	86	9	5
11. Accept consequences of my own actions	85	9	6
12. Gathering and analyzing information, observation, reflecting on experience	84	8	7
13. Knowledge of community organizations	82	7	11
14. Responsibility for my own life	80	10	9
15. Awareness of community problems	78	13	9
16. Assume new, important tasks in community and school	78	14	8
17. Communication skills (listening, speaking, presenting ideas through variety of media)	77	11	7
18. Awareness of community resources	71	13	16
19. Realistic ideas about the world of work	71	18	11
20. Learning about a variety of careers	70	22	8
21. Use of leisure time	60	26	14
22. Narrowing career choices	54	34	12
23. To become an effective parent	52	29	19
24. To become an effective consumer	46	32	22

* Strongly agree and agree are combined and disagree and strongly disagree are combined.

television network executives, also reported that they observed student progress toward these 24 outcomes. In one school's program (Beverly Hills High School), the students' supervisors were asked to respond to the same questionnaire as the students. The only difference between the student and supervisor rating was that the latter ratings were more positive, with a much higher incidence of "strongly agree" appearing in their responses.

The Next Step

As interesting and significant as the above results might be, they represent only the beginning of the work of the Evaluation of Experiential Learning Project. The next step will be to subject these observations to more rigorous examination. In their June meeting, the project's staff and Panel of Practitioners gave final form to the formal research design, focusing their investigation on seven issues suggested by the preliminary study: self-concept, responsibility, problem solving, attitudes toward others, learning about the community, communication skills, and career development.

These issues will be examined through standardized tests, project-designed instruments, systematic observations (by teachers, supervisors, parents, and outside observers), case studies, and a myriad of unobtrusive measures. Testing will begin in the fall of 1978 and continue throughout the school year. The aim will be to confirm, qualify, or refute the direct reports of teachers and students.

In addition, they hope to determine what kinds of programs produce what results, what classroom and community activities best help assure their being attained, and what kinds of evaluative techniques are most appropriate to these practices. Among the products of the project will be its research report, a portrait of individual programs and students, a compilation of ideas for program and class activities, and a handbook of evaluative tools which individual schools can use to assess the effectiveness of their own experiential programs.

The Educational Programs Studied

The early findings of this project suggest that direct community experiences may be an important means for nurturing certain kinds of growth and development in students. That similar findings came from such a diverse range of programs is especially interesting. What the programs have in common is that they all engage students in new and challenging roles outside the school. That they all should report similar results suggests that the researchers may be uncovering effects that are generic to experiential education. If that is the case, not everyone should be surprised.

The notion that *people learn some things best by doing them* (and that adolescents need significant and challenging tasks) is as old as John Dewey, if not Plato. That secondary schools should include experiential learning programs in their general curricula has been an important recommendation of every major commission on youth, education, and citizenship of the last decade. Yet, until now, no one has systematically investigated the assumptions underlying the recommendations, tested the claims made for the programs, or tried to spell out just what is learned through them. This

lack of systematic investigation may explain why, for many educators, such programs remain in the category of things that sound good but may turn out to be more troublesome than worthy.

More exhaustive research is needed, and it is forthcoming. In the meantime, the early accounts of what students (and their teachers, administrators, and community supervisors) report to be the effects of experiential learning programs are certainly encouraging. If these results persist through subsequent research, experiential education will have to be viewed as an effective means for achieving some of the highest goals in education.

Math Teachers Approve Calculator Use

The calculator has been officially recognized as an instructional aid in the classroom by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. A recent statement by the NCTM reads, in part:

As instructional aids, calculators can support the development and discovery of mathematical concepts. As computational tools, they reduce the time needed to solve problems, thereby allowing the consideration of a wider variety of applications. Furthermore, the use of calculators requires students to focus on the analysis of problems and the selection of appropriate operations. The effective use of calculators can improve student attitudes toward, and increase interest in, mathematics.

However, the statement also warns that the use of calculators . . . will not replace the necessity for learning computational skills.
