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Continuous, Interactive, and Online: A Framework for Experiential Learning with Working Adults

by *Eric Riedel, Leilani Endicott, Anna Wasescha, and Brandy Goldston*

The 1970s marked a period of widespread experimentation in higher education, much of it in response to criticisms that universities were either dangerously aloof from the practicalities of the workplace or nefariously in league with the military-industrial complex. Curricular innovations such as internships, field experiences, and service-learning were established to demonstrate that universities understood their role in preparing citizens for meaningful work and participation in the larger society.

[Walden University](#) was founded during this period with a mission that placed its students firmly at the center of the academic enterprise. Walden has become a distance learning alternative to traditional graduate schools, enrolling over 22,000 master's and doctoral students seeking degrees in education, management, psychology, engineering, health and human services, and nursing. Walden does not have a bricks-and-mortar campus; instead, it uses [eCollege](#) to host online classrooms that include areas for classroom discussion, group work, document sharing, and assignment submission. The programs at Walden are administered through online courses, faculty-guided independent study projects called Knowledge Area Modules ([KAMs](#)), or a mix of the two approaches. Lead faculty develop courses, which are then administered by full and part-time faculty who guide discussion, provide feedback on assignments, and supplement standard course materials. Faculty mentors guide student work on KAMs through e-mail, telephone, and an online forum providing continuous support to all of a mentor's students. Doctoral students are also required to attend 20 days of in-person residencies with faculty and other students held at temporary meeting spaces each year.

Walden students are adults already experienced in the world of work and active in community life. For this reason, the traditional internship or service-learning model—in which theory-based learning usually takes place prior to initial practice in a given setting—does not lend itself to their distinctive circumstances. Often these students have rich practitioner experience that precedes immersion in theory, and at Walden their formal education in theory is typically contemporaneous with their further practice in the field. As one of the founders argued in an initial vision for the university, "The faculty may be more theoretically astute but a student group representing all ages and diverse backgrounds could bring a rich experiential base from which to validate and inform theoretical perspectives" (Hodgkinson 1969, 3; see also the [2005 graduation address](#) by university founders). Since its inception, Walden University has striven to stay true to a student-centered philosophy of transforming working professionals into scholar-practitioners who, in turn, will apply their knowledge in service of positive social change.

In the following article, we describe Walden University's model of the scholar-practitioner as an interaction between the adult learner's past, current, and future work experiences and the classroom. We argue that this model, in its emphasis on developing an expanded social understanding of student experience, promotes John Dewey's understanding of how experience should be incorporated into education. This approach is contrasted with other ways to frame experiential learning and the online classroom. We then illustrate the scholar-practitioner model with reference to admissions criteria, classroom examples, and a content analysis of social change activities as reported in the university's annual alumni survey.

Dewey's Theory of Education

John Dewey is often viewed as one of the first advocates of experiential learning for his theories of experience and education as well as his early innovations at the University of Chicago laboratory school at

the turn of the century. Dewey's vision of education was not only about application in the classroom or connecting theory to activity more generally; it was also about activity imbued with social meaning. This vision in turn reflected his understanding of the role of education within a democracy. For Dewey (1916), democracy is defined as a way of life rather than merely the sum total of particular political institutions. Democracy differed from prior political cultures by removing social barriers between individuals and expanding individual interests; citizens in a democracy had more interests in common and more varied and wide-ranging contact with one another. Dewey thus described democracy "as primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 1916, 87). In this context, education was deemed successful if it encouraged growth in the student, and growth was defined as the expansion of the student's interests such that the student grew in awareness of his or her interdependence with others and society.

In turn, Dewey centered his theory of education on what he termed the principles of continuity and interaction. The principle of continuity "means that every experience both takes something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey 1938, 35). The principle of interaction describes a matching of students' internal interests to the external conditions that would facilitate learning. Dewey referred to these two principles as the "longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience" (1938, 44). These longitudinal and lateral aspects of Dewey's theory, as well as his vision of the broader democratic goals of education, will frame our discussion of experiential learning as well as its distinctive implementation at Walden University.

Experiential Learning Theory and e-Learning

Several theorists have drawn on Dewey's theories about the interplay between experience and learning. Kolb's (1974; 1984) work on the learning cycle is among the most often cited in relation to experiential learning. Kolb theorized that learning is a continuous cycle of experience, observation, and reflection; with each cycle, the student modifies his or her understanding and then tests the new insight with another cycle of experience and observation. Components of the learning cycle, in turn, correspond to preferred learning styles. As Jarvis (1987) argued, however, experience is not necessarily followed by reflection or learning. Thus one of the fundamental challenges in experiential learning is to establish an environment in which the learning cycle can unfold in its fullest possible depth and scope.

In addressing this challenge, research on the intersection between experiential and online learning has taken several paths according to where the experience takes place. One approach is to view the online learning environment as encompassing the experience. Applications of experiential learning theory from this perspective have focused on providing a rich, multi-faceted learning experience that supports multiple learning styles (Pimentel [1999](#)). More indirectly, whole sub-fields of research have dealt extensively with the topic of constructing effective online learning environments, although not necessarily from the perspective of experiential education. A second approach treats the online classroom as a variant of the bricks-and-mortar classroom in relation to traditional service learning experiences (Strait and Saur 2004). From this perspective, the experience is what happens, face-to-face, outside the classroom as an application of the materials learned in the classroom. In both approaches, the educational institution directly shapes the experience.

An alternative model of the intersection between experiential and online learning relies on those professional and social experiences the students bring to the learning environment from their lives beyond the classroom. This scholar-practitioner approach contrasts with the traditional university model whereby a young adult with little work experience withdraws from the wider society to focus primarily on learning. The opportunity costs for older adults already engaged in professional, community, and family life often preclude such a withdrawal. Online and distance education can lower these costs, such that the removal of individual students from their professional and social contexts is not required.

An experiential learning model of this sort can closely correspond to Dewey's theories of continuity and interaction, as well as his broader sense of the role of education in a democratic society. In terms of continuity, this model does not reinforce a disconnect between past, present, and future; it rather seeks to

transform the role and awareness of the student within an ongoing process of experience in which reflection and action are always reciprocal with one another. In terms of interaction, this model does not entail the student's experience being directly shaped by the educational institution; it rather requires that the institution adjust its programs to accommodate the student's current and continued professional experience, such that a similar reciprocity exists between pedagogical processes and student needs. Across both of these latitudinal and longitudinal dimensions, the task of the instructor is to help shift students' awareness within their current experience so that they understand the wider social context of such experience and its interdependence with the larger public good. As will be illustrated below, it is this scholar-practitioner model that serves as the framework for the online programs at Walden University.

Walden's Scholar-Practitioner Model and Experiential Learning

Professional Experience Prior to Walden

The admissions policy of Walden University requires that doctoral students have three years of practice within the field in which they seek a degree. Master's students are not required to have experience in their field at the time of admission, although these students typically do have such experience above and beyond the requirements they otherwise must meet. The average age of the Walden student is 37.6 years old, and nearly all of them are employed full-time during the period in which they are enrolled.

Experience and the Walden Online Learning Environment

At Walden University the scholar-practitioner model suffuses the curriculum, which provides structure and support for students as they seek and apply theories and research findings that are relevant to their professional roles. At the same time, dialogues regarding the relationship between applied practice and positive social change are integrated into early coursework, mentorship from faculty, residencies, and community activities such as the annual [Conference on Social Change](#). Through such dialogues, the programs at Walden promote the longer-term goal of infusing awareness of social change implications into the students' dissertation and thesis work and, ultimately, into their postgraduate professional roles.

In keeping with an emphasis on aligning learning activities with students' current professional experience, the technological infrastructure for Walden's programs includes two main segments of applications. The online classroom serves as the vehicle for communications and activities related to the online courses taught at the university; this segment provides access to course-related discussion boards, assignments, and simulations. In turn, the online research forum serves as the vehicle for independent study projects as well as subsequent thesis and dissertation work; this segment provides access to [KAM](#) resources, a discussion forum for students and their faculty mentors, and dissertation resources. Taken together, these components of the online environment allow students to pursue a full range of activities while applying their work and their research to their own distinctive professional settings ([Exhibit 1](#)).

In their initial coursework, students adopt the role of scholar-practitioners in a variety of ways. Within the program courses, students in the online classroom are typically asked to draw upon their prior and current experiences in course discussions ([Exhibit 2](#)) and assignments ([Exhibit 3](#)). Likewise, in more specialized application assignments and discussions, students employ new concepts and models to gain further insight about their professional experience. For example, an application assignment in a master's-level education course on learning styles asks students to apply research in understanding a student in their current classroom ([Exhibit 4](#)). In a discussion forum, students in this same course share experiences from their particular classrooms while reflecting upon their growing inventory of teaching styles ([Exhibit 5](#)). For master's and doctoral students, such reflection on their own professional experience serves as the foundation for their subsequent work, which expands its focus into the wider professional and social context of that experience.

In their more advanced coursework, particularly their independent studies (KAMs) and their theses or dissertations, students then begin to plan and pursue their own research based on a current professional

setting—typically the setting in which they are currently involved. At this stage, groups of doctoral students working under the same faculty mentor are enrolled in a research forum that provides access to discussions under a specific topic or facet of their program as well as posted resources to aid their study. In the research forum, mentors assist students in understanding the application of theory to their own professional and community contexts. For example, in one online discussion the mentor challenges her students about the role of application in educational research ([Exhibit 6](#)). In another example, the mentor assists in interpreting the application requirements for KAMs ([Exhibit 7](#)). These more focused, individualized interactions allow students to develop research that both broadens their understanding of professional contexts and offers notable professional contributions ([Exhibit 8](#)). All master's theses and doctoral dissertations are required to demonstrate the significance of their research in terms of "(a.) knowledge generation, (b.) professional application, and (c.) positive social change" (Walden University [2005](#), 6). All are submitted online, defended orally in conference calls, and made available via the ProQuest database.

Finally, throughout the course of study, the online learning environment serves as a platform for preparing students for in-person residencies by providing further information, readings, and a common contact point between students. The Walden Web site also assists in bridging the online and in-person events that are focused on social change.

Experience Following Walden

The model of experiential learning proposed here posits that through the use of online education, working adults bring their professional and social experience to the classroom but typically remain in that same experiential context while in school. The task of the university is to facilitate student reflection on past and current experience in order to increase awareness of interdependence with the interests of others. In line with Dewey's understanding of growth, achievement of this goal should not cease at graduation but continue to shape student action within and student understanding of subsequent experiences.

The annual alumni survey of Walden graduates provides information regarding the impact of Walden on subsequent experience. The 2005 alumni survey was administered as a Web-based survey in November 2005 to alumni who graduated from Walden in 2004, 1999, and 1994. The final response rate was 27.9% (n=617).

An open-ended question about social change activities following graduation asked, "Walden University defines positive social change as a deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the worth, dignity, and development of individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, cultures, and societies. Are you able to identify any positive social change you have been able to contribute to (inside or outside your profession) as a result of your graduate studies? Please describe." The sample of responses included all of the 37.6% respondents who answered this question (n=232).

The research team took an inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to document the themes that emerged from the responses in the two surveys. This resulted in a data-driven set of 21 social change impact categories. The research team then studied these categories and collapsed them into nine major themes ([Exhibit 9](#)). These included:

- Increased Professional Knowledge / Opportunities
- Increased Confidence / Empowerment
- Action Research
- Grant-writing
- Leadership
- Teaching / Training / Communication / Advice
- Program Development
- Yes (unspecified)
- No social change impact

A single coder determined how to best code each of the 232 responses and assigned one code per response. Fifteen percent of the sample was recoded by another coder, and 88% of the reliability coder's categories matched the previously assigned codes, with a calculated kappa of .89. This means that independent coders gave identical codes 89% of the time beyond what would be expected by chance alone.

We then calculated the percentage of students reporting each type of social change activity ([Figure 1](#)). By far, the most frequently reported category of social change impact was Leadership (31% of responses). In breaking down the various types of leadership-related subcategories, we tabulated them in turn according to their frequency ([Figure 2](#)). Educational leadership at the K-12 (30%) and postsecondary (8%) levels were commonly reported. A typical example of K-12 leadership was, "I am now taking more of a leadership role in integrating curriculum, by finding ways for the arts to enhance other content areas," while postsecondary leadership tended to be reported by individuals already holding administrative positions at colleges and universities (e.g., "I am very active in the college that I work in supporting the adult learner. We have in the past 18 months changed the paradigm to a student centered approach."). In addition to educational leadership, many graduates were also leading change within their respective communities. For example, alumni reported leadership roles in community efforts (31% of leadership responses) such as anti-poverty campaigns, the development of a community center, and a program to enhance parental involvement in education and thereby increase student achievement and overall academic advancement.

Discussion

At Walden University, Dewey's concepts of interaction and continuity are realized in an experiential and electronic format that Dewey himself could never have imagined. While continuing to remain within their professional and social contexts, the students bring professional experience to the learning environment and are guided through a cumulative personal discovery cycle consisting of interacting with their profession's community through research activities and literature review and thinking critically through authentic professional challenges.

The research and reflection components of the curriculum explicitly focus on developing an awareness of social change impact. Dewey's principle of continuity is demonstrated when we examine alumni reports of multiple levels of social change impact in the years after graduation, namely leadership and increased professional engagement. However, these results have implications for both the strengths of the Walden model and its areas for future improvement. The reported awareness of social change impact can be understood as a successful application of the Walden model insofar as graduates report applying an expanded understanding of their practitioner role; at the same time, such results may also suggest that alumni fail to see social consequences of their involvement that extend beyond their immediate professional environment. One implication of this limitation that Walden has started to explore is the need for an increased interdisciplinary emphasis in graduate studies at Walden. For example, core research courses may be developed to include students from multiple disciplines in the same course, thereby increasing exposure of students to other perspectives of research and its applications.

Studies of curriculum effectiveness are challenging when students bring such a range of previous experience to the learning environment. However, this content analysis of alumni data provides some evidence of continuity across pre-Walden professional experience, Walden's curricular immersion in research and critical thinking, and students' subsequent post-graduation participation in their communities. Future studies examining the convergence of experiential and electronic learning might also benefit from a holistic, continuous view of student development.

Conclusion

The scholar-practitioner model at Walden University was developed because its founders envisioned education in much the same fashion as John Dewey did in the early decades of the century, and it is a model that is all the more suited for meeting the challenges of our own era. As more institutions seek to address the

increased demand for lifelong learning opportunities, information technology will certainly provide one vital key to positive change; however, it will be just as vital for these institutions to find purpose and direction through a pedagogical philosophy that embraces experiential learning as the foundation for future growth. While the approach at Walden may not be suitable for every program or institution, we believe that it may serve as a valuable precedent for further forms of innovative practice in distance learning, as well as further applications of progressive pedagogy in other sectors of higher education.

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