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Patrick M. Green

Loyola University Chicago, pgreen@luc.edu

Theresa Castor

University of Wisconsin-Parkside, castor@uwp.edu

Dale J. Leyburn

Nazareth College, dleybur7@naz.edu

Don DeMaria

University of Georgia, demaria@uga.edu

Andres Jaime

Higher Ed Partners

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Experiential Learning Educators as Tempered Radicals and Social Change Agents in Higher Education: The NSEE Fellows Program as Reflective Practitioner-Scholars

PATRICK M. GREEN
THERESA CASTOR
DALE LEYBURN
DON DEMARIA
ANDRES JAIME

Loyola University Chicago
University of Wisconsin-Parkside
Nazareth College
University of Georgia
Higher Ed Partners

Experiential learning educators have long fought to justify this form of active learning in their curriculum (Hesser, 2013), and the past several decades have seen a resurgence of, and renewed interest in, experiential learning through forms of hands-on learning, such as: service-learning/community-based learning, educational internships, global study abroad experiences, and undergraduate research opportunities (Kuh, 2008). Given its distinct elements in planning, design, and implementation of teaching and learning (Heinrich and Green, 2020), and its potential outcomes that can lead to deep learning (Kuh, 2008), experiential learning requires educators to contribute ample amounts of time and energy in the planning and execution of such courses and programs. More importantly, another reason educators may utilize this pedagogical approach is to practice and advocate for a different paradigm of teaching and learning.

Responding to this call for new pedagogical approaches is the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE), with its clear mission “to cultivate educators who effectively use experiential education as an integral part of personal, professional, civic and global learning” (<https://www.nsee.org/vision-mission-and-goals>). As a professional organization dedicated to experiential educators through education, scholarship, and networking, NSEE launched the NSEE Fellows program in fall 2020, which features a vigorous and competitive application process facilitated by the NSEE Research and Scholarship

Committee. The call for applications was initially geared towards educators facilitating internship programs and intentionally seeking to engage with the National College Internship Survey facilitated by the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT). The NSEE Fellows program seeks “to develop a community of scholarship for scholar-practitioners and graduate students” (<https://nsee.memberclicks.net/nsee-fellows-program>) who are professionals working in the experiential education field, with explicit program goals “to broaden opportunities in experiential education research and scholarship” through:

1. broadening volunteer participation and leadership engagement across the NSEE membership,
2. addressing membership’s interest in generating ideas to strengthen experiential education at their respective institutions, and
3. increasing NSEE members’ scholarly opportunities around experiential education. (<https://www.nsee.org/nsee-fellows-program>)

The inaugural cohort of NSEE Fellows consisted of four professionals from across the country, (see authors of this article, led by NSEE Engaged Scholar, Dr. Patrick M. Green) who met monthly as a cohort, as well as monthly as members of the NSEE Research and Scholarship Committee.

Given the overview of the NSEE Fellows program, this article will demonstrate the practitioner-scholar framework from which the fellows operated, provide examples of their scholarly reflections, and explore how the fellows engage in practice and theory through their professional roles. In doing so, we illustrate a reflective practitioner-scholar model (Schön, 1983; Lytle, 2008; Ravitch, 2014) and its relevance for experiential educators from diverse backgrounds. Connecting to the theme for this special issue, we show how the reflective practitioner-scholar model converged with and supported our development as tempered radicals and social change agents (Dostilio, 2017; Janke, 2019) in shaping our professional work in designing and implementing internship programs and policies that recognize the promise of internships as a form of experiential education for diverse students during challenging times and in a challenged society. The following section will include the fellow's reflections on experiential learning practices and strategies that advocate for student learning and success. The article commences with a call to action for experiential learning educators to embrace their role as tempered radicals and change agents in order to transform higher education.

Practitioner-Scholar Framework: What are we advocating for in our practice?

Initially the cohort met to explore the results of the National College Internship Survey, in collaboration with Dr. Matthew Hora and his team at the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions at UW-Madison. The CCWT oversees the College Internship Study, a longitudinal mixed-methods study of student internship experiences at 17 institutions; CCWT partnered with NSEE to engage several member institutions to be part of the pilot study in spring 2021. Exploring the results provided to participating institutions in late summer 2021 by CCWT (Hora et al., 2021), the NSEE Fellows examined our role as professionals who could serve as data “translators” upon survey report delivery and identified opportunities to strengthen internship experiential education at our respective colleges/universities.

This interrogation into our practice and inquiry was prompted by the CCWT's National Internship College Survey and the research emerged from CCWT on barriers to internships. The research indicated six barriers for college students taking an internship, including the need to work at currently held paid jobs, increased course load, lack of internship opportunities, insufficient internship pay, lack of transportation, and lack of childcare (Hora et al., 2019). This

exploration caused us to reflect and deliberate on some core questions: What are we advocating for in experiential education?; As facilitators of internship programs, what change are we advocating to create and why?; What barriers to experiential learning are we witnessing regarding the student populations with which we work, and to what extent are there barriers that we want to mitigate so that all students can enjoy experiential learning and its potential impact?

Our reflections posited that a fundamental aspect of our role as educators who are practitioner-scholars administering programs was to create change as we support student success through experiential learning. In other words, as experiential learning educators, we were reflecting on our role as advocates for learning and student success, with an explicit eye toward equity, access, and justice. As we inquired into our practices, we moved quickly to questions rooted in changes that elicited more opportunities for students to engage in experiential learning and to foster student success.

In this interrogation of our practice, we situated our work in a practitioner-scholar framework (Salipante & Aram, 2003; Lytle, 2008; Ravitch, 2014). We also explored our roles through the lens of community engagement professionals and scholar-administrators, specifically community engagement professionals framed as tempered radicals (Dostilio, 2017) and the scholar-administrator framed as change agents within higher education (Janke, 2019). Both of these framing lenses situate higher education professionals as instruments of institutional change and offer a perspective in which the functions of such professionals intersect with the visionary change they seek to create. Through these multiple frames, the NSEE Fellows drew from their experience as a form of knowledge, as educators and facilitators of experiential learning programs (e.g., internship programs and internship courses), to inform their interrogation.

As part of this inquiry process, the NSEE Fellows engaged in reflective writing as well as descriptive writing of their professional practices. Drawing from a reflective practitioner approach along with scholarly personal narrative (Schön, 1983; Nash, 2014), the fellows continued to write and return to their writing and reflection over the year. Through deliberation in meetings, as well as individual writing and reflection, the NSEE Fellows shared aspects of experiential education that they sought to change. Acknowledging their potential role as a change agent, the NSEE Fellows developed change-oriented approaches emerging from their responses to barriers and problem-solving approach-

es to improve higher education. In the following section, we share some of these reflections as a way of illustrating the practitioner scholar model and the development of the Fellows' social change advocacy as materialized in administrator and educator practice.

Reflections on Experiential Learning Practices

Throughout this year-long fellowship program, each of the NSEE Fellows reflected on their professional position, practice, and roles as an experiential learning educator and a practitioner scholar. The following excerpts of their initial reflections demonstrate their positionality as experiential learning educators:

I am a Professor of Communication and the Faculty Director of Internships at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. As the Faculty Director of Internships, I am responsible for supporting academic aspects of internships including faculty professional development, advocating curricular policies and instructional practices related to internships, and generally, supporting faculty in implementing best practices with respect to internships for academic credit. In my position, I work within the Alan E. Guskin Center for Community and Business Engagement. In practice, I have leaned more toward the "scholar" side of being a practitioner-scholar in that in my role as a faculty member, I have conducted research on various professional practices. As a teacher, I engage my students to reflect on their identities and communication as developing practitioners or professionals. I have recently discovered increasing convergence across my different teaching, service, and research activities on the matter of work-integrated learning. My goals are to continue exploring the idea of "work-integrated learning" and to contribute to initiatives that creatively merge learning, work, and learner agency. [Reflections of Theresa Castor]

I am the Assistant Director of Internships at Nazareth College. My main responsibilities include oversight of the centralized Internship Program at Nazareth (policies, procedures, etc.) and providing support, guidance, and instruction to students enrolled in credit-bearing internships. I would describe myself as an emerging practitioner-scholar. More specifically, I mean I better understand how I have "lived" the role of a practitioner-scholar and am now framing and viewing my role in internships through this lens. Given the time it takes to keep the internship program at Nazareth operational (the practitioner part), my goal is to carve out more time to explore more emerging theory and research in the area of experiential education and more widely contributing to our community of practice. [Reflections of Dale Leyburn]

I am the Director for the Center for Career Development and Testing at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas. In my role, I lead the development of career development and experiential learning initiatives such as internship support for academic credit, career counseling, employer relations, professional skills development workshops, and career events such as job and internship fairs. In my position, I work closely with NACE, NSEE, HACU, and other national organizations guiding professional development and experiential learning best practices, guidelines, and resources. Throughout my career, I have held several positions as an administrator of various student affairs programs, mainly in the career development field. I have mainly identified as a practitioner and a consumer of research over a scholar identity actively involved in the research process and the creation of new knowledge. However, over the recent years, I have deepened my involvement in research practices as I have expanded the presence of career development at my institution through increased collaboration with faculty and leadership groups such as the institutional strategic plan team and the Quality Enhancement Program committee where opportunities to engage in research practices have been available. Seeking opportunities to deliver equitable and inclusive experiential services at my institution has been a central driver of my motivation as an emerging scholar-practitioner. My added involvement in research and the realization of the importance of the lived experiences of practitioners as a form of knowledge guiding the research process have re-shaped my perception of the practitioner-scholar framework and allowed me to feel a stronger connection with it as my own identity. [Reflections of Andres Jaime]

I am the Director of the Washington Semester Program at the University of Georgia, serving in this role since 2007. I am responsible for all aspects of the operations of this internship-focused, domestic field study program. This includes oversight of academic and residential life, internship relations, career preparation, development, and alumni relations. I also teach the foundational seminar course in the program, which I designed when I was appointed as the founding director. I am a member of the Experiential Learning Advisory Group and played a leadership role in the development of an experiential learning requirement for all students. I have always wanted to have more time on the "scholar" side of my role as a practitioner scholar. Earlier in my career at the University of Georgia, I was a part-time Ph.D. student and unfortunately did not finish, running out of time as an ABD student. In my current role, there is not much support for scholarly work, unless I make the time during nights and weekends. I see myself as a curious learner, often gaining insights from outside my applied field of higher education. [Reflections of Don DeMaria]

Upon review of the NSEE Fellows' initial reflections, there were many common elements across the academic professionals. Each of the professionals worked closely with the institution's internship program, each served as "third space professionals" (Witchurch, 2013) in which they taught classes while also administering a program, and each sought to connect their practice more intentionally with scholarship. Their reflections on their positionality also clearly articulated the desire to dismantle barriers in experiential education and to increase the inclusivity of the field.

As each of the NSEE Fellows reflected on their professional positionality, they also reflected on their practices in the context of higher education. Such reflections highlighted concerns for barriers within experiential education, and questions that led to alternative approaches in experiential learning programs and practices. Their reflections turned toward areas of passion, practices of concern, and needed change within experiential learning in the higher education context. For example, several fellows indicated they were passionate about student success through the lens of access and equity. Drawing from their own experiences, or lack thereof, each of the professionals connected the importance of experiential learning to quality education. Although each of the fellows emphasized quality experiences, they also emphasized relationships, learning-centered programs, and access to meaningful experiences for all students:

As an undergraduate student within the field of sport management, I completed multiple internships and a culminating research project that investigated the key skills and qualities that internship site supervisors valued in sport management interns. In hindsight, my internship experiences and research project were less about sport management, research, and career outcomes, rather, these experiences served as an early entry into the field of experiential education, being a practitioner-scholar, and my life's work in internships. In my early work within the field of career services, I regularly met with students prior to, and upon completion of an internship. I often felt it would have been helpful for many students to have someone guiding them through the experience and encouraging them to engage more deeply in their role, explore the organization (culture, challenges, relationships), and push past their comfort zone and experiment more. As my career has evolved, I have used this information and feedback to create an academic internship program that is centered upon engagement and belonging. Academic internship programs provide a great opportunity to deepen engagement in the experience - which has many "in experience" benefits and helps interns make more informed decisions about what comes next. This is what I am most passionate about.
[Reflections of Dale Leyburn]

When I was an undergraduate student, I never completed an internship. I was advised to, encouraged to, even shown the bulletin board where internships were posted. Between my shyness and self-doubts as a first-generation college student, I found it easier to pursue other high-impact educational activities such as being a research assistant for a faculty member who took me under close mentorship. As I continue to reflect on my own college experiences, I consider the importance of individual faculty contact and connections with students. I am passionate about working with faculty in supporting them in working with students in obtaining and learning from their internships. I am passionate about increasing equity and access of high-impact learning experiences for students.
[Reflections of Theresa Castor]

Similar to my colleagues, I also did not complete an internship during my experience as an undergraduate student. As a first-generation student, I had little knowledge of the value of an internship or other experiential opportunities/high-impact practices available during college. I also needed to work full time to contribute to my family's financial needs which imposed a limitation on the time I was able to dedicate to certain co-curricular activities. Unpaid internships were not an option for me, which also limited the number of internship options available for me. In addition, I did not feel particularly integrated into the community of experiential learning services from a cultural perspective and as a Latinx first-generation immigrant. Later in my professional life, these experiences sparked a strong interest in exploring experiential learning theory and practice from a cultural integration perspective and a recognition of the ways of knowing and learning of underserved student communities across higher education. I aspire to contribute positively to enhancing equity and inclusion in the experiential learning field.
[Reflections of Andres Jaime]

I am most passionate about internships but also have an interest in study away- conveniently these are the two areas where my program converges. The application of your learning in a work setting is a transformative experience for students and as a practitioner-scholar, it is my responsibility to help students maximize their experiences, both in their learning and job skills. I want my students to ask meaningful questions and pause to reflect on their experiences. I see myself as a coach guiding them in their experiences, giving them fundamentals to make them better and calling a timeout when necessary. [Reflections of Don DeMaria]

The emphasis of the NSEE Fellows clearly expresses ensuring that experiential education opportunities are accessible to all students and their reflections articulate a desire to increase opportunities for all students. Through their reflections and collaborative dialogue,

the NSEE Fellows continued to discuss barriers to experiential learning opportunities, such as internships. This dialogue led the fellows to note in their reflections that there are many areas of experiential education they seek to change or practices they seek to improve. The re-emerging themes of quality experiential education and access and equity dominated their reflections:

I want to see an emphasis placed on more long-term experiences. The research tells us that long-term experiential learning opportunities have a greater impact than their short-term counterparts. I worry that with the expansion of and emphasis on experiential learning on many campuses throughout the nation, the focus may shift to quantity over quality. I also hope to eliminate any notion that compensation cannot be earned if a student earns academic credit. [Reflections of Don DeMaria]

There are not areas that I want to change per se, but there are trends that I wish to endorse and encourage. First, I am heartened by expanding notions of experiential education that include specific educational practices (i.e., service learning, internships, etc.), and discussions of how to enhance the quality of experiential education (i.e., through reflection, intentional learning outcomes, etc.). I also support the “disruption” of the idea of “silos” for the work of faculty (i.e., that teaching, research, and service are separate activities where quality in one or more may be at the expense of the others). Good teaching, including experiential education, can be pursued, along with excellence in our other areas. If we want our students to be integrative learners, then we should model how to be integrative in our own professional practices. [Reflections of Theresa Castor]

I would like to contribute to change in experiential learning theory to guide more equitable practices to support underrepresented student communities given their unique strengths and cultural capital. From my perspective, it is difficult to talk about change before developing a deeper understanding of the students’ lived experiences. I believe that the student’s voice is the true anchor of effective meaningful change to improve the way we support student success through higher education opportunities including experiential learning services accessible for students of all backgrounds. [Reflections of Andres Jaime]

I’m mindful of recent and ongoing conversations about the value of higher education, the perceived skills gap, and access to quality experiential education. While it has been said before, experiential education can play an even more significant role and become the foundation and standard for education in the future. I would like to see experiential learning activities and application of best practices be a requirement for all courses. [Reflections of Dale Leyburn]

Their reflections emphasize altering current practices in order to improve the experiential education field. Their assumed role as change agent is indicated in their reflections as they articulate different approaches to improve practice and enhance student success, consistently through the lens of access and equity for all students.

In addition to the suggested changes and improved practices in the approach to experiential learning, the NSEE Fellows reflected on areas of concern that need to be addressed. The NSEE Fellows further identified topics related to experiential education within the context of equity, access, and justice. Unpaid internships emerged as the dominant theme of concern, as well as other barriers for students, such as inherent bias, limitations to access, and varied levels of preparation for internship experiences (pre-professional experiences). The following excerpts highlight their reflections:

The topic of “preparation” before “access” must be further explored to expose current practices in terms of outcomes and effectiveness to achieve the objectives set through program delivery for students from diverse backgrounds (race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, transfer students, veterans, etc.). Unpaid internships are also an area needing more attention from the practical and legal perspectives (value of education as private property and labor laws). [Reflections of Andres Jaime]

I think one of the most obvious topics relating to equity and access surrounding internships involves unpaid experiences. In addition, what I have been thinking about most recently is what we can do before or within an internship experience to prepare students to foster a sense of belonging in the workplace. [Reflections of Dale Leyburn]

Unpaid internships. Limited access to experiential education opportunities because of a student’s background circumstances (e.g., time, knowledge of opportunities, encouragement to complete such opportunities). [Reflections of Theresa Castor]

Obviously, unpaid internships are a great concern. Yet, there are other barriers to opportunity that exist for underrepresented students, making it more difficult to obtain internships (e.g. navigating the hidden curriculum, lack of social/cultural capital, inherent bias by those who select students for leadership opportunities, etc.). [Reflections of Don DeMaria]

Through their reflections, the NSEE Fellows identify specific aspects of internships, based on their professional experiences with students, which need

to be addressed in order to offer more equitable experiences. Such dialogue led the NSEE Fellows to craft and develop specific programs, techniques and experiential learning approaches in response to the barriers and their expressed concerns. From these reflections upon experiential learning practice and barriers to internships for students, the NSEE Fellows reflected on practices they utilized and sought to utilize. In the process, each of the fellows developed specific experiential learning tools to support educators in fostering the changes we hope to see in our field. The article that follows highlights the recommendations of the NSEE Fellows to enhance student experience and increase access and equity to quality internship opportunities for students. In this respect, the NSEE Fellows work described in the article to follow reflects one way to apply an “imagination for justice in experiential learning and teaching” (Green, 2021) to shape academic internship programs with an eye towards pedagogy, practice, programming, purpose, and policy (see “Advocating for Experiential Learning Programs as Change Agents in Higher Education: Imagining a Justice Orientation that Centers Students and Partners and Enriches Practice”).

Conclusion

Engaging with their practitioner-scholar identity as tempered radicals and change agents, the NSEE Fellows were able to create, craft, and catalyze different approaches to facilitating experiential education programs. This reflective exercise challenged the NSEE Fellows to recognize their role as change agents within higher education, and specifically within the experiential education field. They explored connections between theory and practice, and they developed insights into areas of interest within the experiential learning field. Their ideation through reflective writing was followed by scholarly approaches that emerge in the next article of this special issue. It is also important to note the role of the NSEE Fellows’ director (led by NSEE Engaged Scholar, Dr. Patrick M. Green) in guiding this process by providing a framing of the Fellows’ work (e.g., through sharing and discussing literature on the practitioner-scholar framework), in posing dialogic questions that facilitated reflection, in creating a safe space for exploring and interrogating practice, and in creating pathways to engage in individual and collective practice-based reflection.

As the NSEE Fellows reflected on their experiences, they highlighted that the monthly meetings provided a space for reflection, thought leadership, and exploration of ideas on experiential learning and teaching. Specifically noted was the fact that the fellowship experience was a space for the organic

development of thought and space for discovery.

The opportunity to share thoughts, challenges, and aspirations with colleagues that share professional and personal goals and values under the mission to create positive change in experiential learning is a central benefit for the NSEE fellowship. Through reflection and a sharing of the scholar-practitioner identity, we have an opportunity to co-create a space where other experiential learning educators can find support and a sense of belonging across the higher education institutions and communities. This experience has elevated my personal commitment to experiential learning advocacy and student success through justice and I join an inspiring group of experiential education, social mobility, and radical change agents. [Reflections of Andres Jaime]

The reflections and activities demonstrate the recognition of the fellows that they have agency in their professional roles to create change and have the opportunity to serve as change agents.

The structure and framing of the fellowship provided space for practitioner-scholars to connect with other professionals. The fellows shared how the monthly meetings and virtual work had an impact on their professional experiences and their professional identity:

The structure and framing of the fellowship experience integrated with how I think about my own work. It is not just “extra,” but a synergy with my own work. It influences how I think about what I do for my work, but in an enhanced way. Our monthly meetings provided a way to engage in this exploration as well as to learn from each other. [Reflections of Theresa Castor]

This fellowship has been a process of exploration and growth. It has reminded me to make time to stimulate my “scholar” side when too often, I am putting out fires as a “practitioner.” It has opened up to me a new network of passionate, smart and engaged professionals and I approach my work in a more effective way after becoming a part of this community. [Reflections of Don DeMaria]

The NSEE collaboration and contributions are aligned with our day-to-day work through the various occupations represented in the Fellowship. Therefore, advocating for institutional leadership support is vital to continue investing meaningful time and resources into this program. The NSEE Fellowship has supported my ability to continue expanding my understanding of the theories and practices related to experiential education and justice, as well as the knowledge of the communities that we serve. I believe the NSEE Fellowship experience has validated our commitment and dedication to advance positive change in the field. The common goal of the group as tempered radicals and change

agents to impact positive change in the field has been the anchor of our discussions, reflections, and writing. The opportunity to make a positive contribution and learn from this group of inspiring leaders is a humbling experience that keeps me grounded and accountable. [Reflections of Andres Jaime]

Working with NSEE Fellows and Dr. Green has helped me to understand and embrace the role of a practitioner-scholar and view my work in a new light. I have found new opportunities for growth and creativity and can more confidently understand the impact I have made and can make within the field. I especially appreciate the reflective exercises we have engaged in and ways we have authentically merged the practical, theoretical, and aspirational.

[Reflections of Dale Leyburn]

Through creating spaces for practitioner-scholars to connect, reflect, and share their experiences as a source of knowledge, and then connect theory and practice, they have the opportunity to not only build a community of practice, but also a community of change agents.

Beyond their scholarly developments which follow in the next article, the NSEE Fellows engaged in reflective writing to interrogate practice, critically inquire into experiential learning drawing from their personal and professional experiences and establish their role as experiential learning educators who serve as change agents and tempered radicals in higher education. This is a call to all experiential educators to be activists within your professional practices and in your own institutions. Through innovative and creative approaches to experiential learning programs, pedagogical approaches anchored in a justice orientation, and policies that center access and equity, the NSEE Fellows explored strategies and tactics to enhance student experiences and foster student success in higher education. This explicit call for action challenges experiential learning educators, practitioner-scholars, faculty, and staff alike to develop experiential learning programs that prioritize access, equity, and a justice orientation so that all students may benefit from such educational programs. In effect, it encourages us to pose the very question centered in the NSEE Fellows inquiry process, “*What are we advocating for?*” and, in this reflective process, to create change in higher education through experiential education. ■

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