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Experiential Education as a Framework for Student Affairs' Educator Role

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide student affairs practitioner-scholars with an applied framework/action plan for incorporating experiential education techniques into their daily practice of hosting and/or advising events, and other planned experiences. Utilizing the National Society of Experiential Education's eight principles of good practice as a praxis, student affairs educators may achieve many of the following benefits: 1) a consistent language and definitions, which will promote a common understanding and common values; 2) a learning community helping to develop skills, known to be effective in ensuring learning and creating an engaged environment; 3) a plethora of research and data into how to deliver the educational experience and appropriately utilize a proven assessment structure. Many student affairs practitioner-scholars are well-versed in theories of student development, transition and student learning, which rightfully inform many of the decisions made by these professionals. This article provides the practitioner-scholar with a complementary framework for educating students.

Keywords: experiential education, student affairs, student learning

In 1970, Paulo Freire published one of his first critical essays on the state of education and what he called the banking method, where he argued faculty-centered approaches lead to “an act of depositing, in which students are depositories, and teachers are depositors. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Friere & Friere, 2004, p. 72). According to Friere, the banking method has a number of deficiencies, one of them being that students do not actually comprehend the deposit.

The banking method has persisted and is often referred to as faculty-centered pedagogy. Faculty-centered pedagogy is characterized by students regurgitating passively acquired information during tests, quizzes, or other assessments. Research into this method shows it often promotes shallow learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) and fails to promote motivation to learn, confidence in one's learning abilities, and enthusiasm for learning (Weimer, 2002). For years before Friere and in years since, educators, philosophers, and current policy makers advocated learning free from rote memorization and the regurgitation of fact.

Many contemporary educators continue the call for the replacement of this methodology with a learning-centered approach, which focuses on the whole learner and the best methods of teaching. McCombs and Whisler (1997) define the learning-centered approach as dual emphasis on individual learners and on what is being learned. Benefits of the learning-centered approach include the following: more efficient and effective learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Mills & Treagust, 2003), broader student experiences, stronger problem solving skills and data interpretation abilities (Landis et al., 1998; Fried, 2006), deeper understanding of subject matter (Bransford et al., 2000), and motivation to learn (Nor, 2008).

A Transitioning Culture

Many faculty members have heeded the call for a learning-centered approach. The days of “death by PowerPoint” are gradually diminishing; techniques consistent with a more learning-centered approach are being employed. Examples include problem-based learning (Savery & Duffy, 1995), service-learning (Jacoby, 1996), and project-based learning (Adderley et al., 1975). However, expecting only faculty to make this transition limits the efficacy to student learning outcomes occurring within the classroom. Student affairs professionals and other administrators are also in a position to educate students in a variety of learning outcomes. Those student affairs professionals who embrace the idea of being educators can play major roles in engaged learning environments.

An engaged learning environment is characterized by the inclusion of all community members as supporters of the educational mission and as active participants in the education process. Potter (1999) described this characterization with this definition: “an environment where faculty, staff, and administrators are all viewed as students and all viewed as co-teachers” (p. 12). In order to create this new environment, there is a strong need for student affairs professionals to actively engage in educational processes, which could range from assisting faculty in the delivery of outcomes related to a specific field to outcomes of a less perceptible nature, such as leadership skills. Schroeder (1999) speaks to the importance of student affairs involvement in the education process by stating “[i]f undergraduate education is to be enhanced, faculty members, joined by academic and student affairs administrators, must devise ways to deliver undergraduate education that are as comprehensive and integrated as the ways that students actually learn” (p. 6). Learning must occur both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Fried (2006) argues students should be able to make meaning of their life experiences, in the classroom and in all daily interactions, including labs, plays, videogames, and employment.

The Educational Role of Student Affairs Professionals

One theoretical foundation of a student affairs role is to support and advise the student in personal growth and development. To assist the students in this development and growth many student affairs practitioners have become experts in a variety of student development theories such as the theory of moral development (Gilligan, 1977); leadership identity development (Komives, Owen, Lognerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006); communities of practice (Hara, 2009), and situated learning (McLellan, 1996). These and other development theories rightfully inform many decisions made by student affairs professionals and strengthen a professional’s ability to utilize an adaptive unconscious decision making process or what Blimling (2011) calls professional judgments. This article is written to provide the scholar-practitioner with a practical framework (action plan) for educating students.

The role of student affairs practitioners as educators is as fundamental to the profession as student development (Magolda & Quaye, 2011). One of the longest held beliefs of the profession, the “Student Personnel Point-of-View” document (American Council on Education, 1937), spells out the following eight domains for which student affairs is keenly poised to provide instruction: 1) Intellectual capacity and achievement, 2) emotional make up, 3) physical condition, 4) social relationships, 5) vocational aptitudes and skills, 6) moral and religious values, 7) economic resources, and 8) aesthetic appreciations. Student affairs practitioners can educate students around the eight domains of the 1937 document through planned experiences. An example is direct department programs geared toward student audiences and those who employ students or engage student volunteers, (e.g. career fairs, religious services, and homecoming events). Another is an advisor to students hosting their own experience, like a retreat or philanthropic program. Regardless of the type of activity,

experiences are part of many student affairs professionals' tool kits. Next, this article examines how these experiences can be planned as an educational opportunity.

Education through Experiences

Student Affairs Practitioners can ensure experiences are instructive by adopting a pedagogically sound educational framework. While other tactics could be adopted, this article espouses experiential education. Experiential education is already used in university settings through co-ops and internships, study abroad, undergraduate research, and service learning. Experiential education, derived from the earlier works of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1951), Kolb (1984) and others, is "learning possibilities of events in daily life ... different domains of human enquiry-personal or interpersonal formal or informal, systematic or unstructured" (Beard & Wilson, 2006, p. 2).

A philosophy which provides for a strong theoretical background is Lewin (1946). Kurt Lewin, an experiential learning forerunner, appears in vast numbers of experiential learning studies (Kolb, 1984; Gentry, 1990; Beard & Wilson, 2006). Lewin suggests the following four conditions are necessary for an experience to be educative:

1) there must be a concrete experience, 2) observation and reflection must occur, 3) the learner must form abstract concepts and generalizations, 4) testing of implications of concepts must be done in new situations.

Principles for Experiential Learning Activities

Utilizing these four conditions and work from other experiential forerunners, a list of eight principles of good practice has been adopted by the National Society for Experiential Education (2013). Upon implementation, these practices provide student affairs professionals with procedures that can enrich learning and ensure an experience is educational. Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman, (1995) further this argument and share the importance of adopting such practices:

Simple participation in a prescribed set of learning experiences does not make something experiential. The experiential methodology is not linear, cyclical, or even patterned. It is a series of working principles, all of which are equally important or must be present to varying degrees at some time during experiential learning. These principles are required no matter what activity the student is engaged in or where the learning takes place (p. 243).

The National Society for Experiential Education (2013) principles include:

Intention

The understanding of why experience is an appropriate way to learn proposed outcomes. In addition students, facilitators, and other participants must have purposeful approaches to how the learning will take place.

Preparedness and Planning

This principle requires that student affairs educators, students, and other parties strategize how the experience will occur and adopt goals and objectives from the outset. The goals and objectives must be intentionally mapped to the activities taking place as part of the experience.

Authenticity

Being connected to a real world "authentic" context is essential to students' experience being educational. Lombardi (2007) argues authentic learning promotes judgment, patience, ability to recognize patterns in unfamiliar contexts, and flexibility to work across cultural

and disciplinary boundaries. Schoïn (1983) advanced the argument; with teacher-centered instruction, the content only goes as far as the teacher proposes and is limited to the ideas and concepts the professor proposes. In addition, the content is usually limited in its scope, often bent towards faculty members' prescribed ideologies and can often be "mastered" by memorization rather than knowing how and when to utilize the information in real life scenarios.

Reflection

In its simplest terms, experiential learning can be compared to children's blocks. Some experiences serve as a foundation; each subsequent experience is stacked upon the last to make a complete structure. Without reflection, the student is unable to utilize the "block" within the structure because the lesson is not fully formed; they must reflect on more than what they learned. Students should reflect on the experience in four different ways. Grossman (2009) provides structure for these types of reflection, which are necessary for comprehension and utilization in future learning: (a) content-based reflection, (b) metacognitive reflection, (c) self-author reflection, and (d) transformative reflection.

Orientation and Training

Within an overall experience, there may be numerous activities requiring orientation and training. For example, a student activities professional utilizing a music festival as an experiential learning opportunity will likely have to orient and train students on how to appropriately setup a stage, hang lighting, read and complete a performer's contract, and handle cash during the ticket sales. These and numerous other activities, which make up the experience of hosting a music festival, must each be introduced, practiced, and assessed for proficiency.

Monitoring and Continuous Improvement

When utilizing events as an educative tool, as with any event, the unforeseen can occur. Without the educator taking responsibility for monitoring students' activities and events, these typical changes in schedule, setbacks, and challenges can derail the learning environment even if the experience moves forward. In the event an unexpected occurrence impedes learning from occurring, new sets of plans should be considered. When adjustments occur, the facilitator should learn from these issues and work to improve future activities and experiences.

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and evaluation helps the facilitator to understand if students have retained student learning outcomes in where they excelled, where there is room for improvement, and how improvements could be made by all participants. "Proponents of assessment believe that higher education should examine what students have learned, not just what the institution or department did that supposedly resulted in learning" (Walvoord, 2010, p. 3). Examples of assessment tools that work well with experiential education include reflective journals and portfolios (Woodward, 1998), jury assessment (Jensen, Brach, & Zeytinci, 2007) and poster presentations (Billington, 1997).

Acknowledgment

Students should be encouraged to acknowledge and share the learning, new skills, and changes in attitudes, which have occurred in the planned experience through activities such as reflection, presentation, and documentation. The National Society for Experiential Educators (2013) calls for all parties to be recognized for the achievement of learning and any other accomplishments that have transpired.

Conclusion

Numerous educators have begun the migration from faculty-centered pedagogy to a learning-centered approach. One associated method is the use of experience as a source of learning. Student affairs professionals who host and advise events and activities are often in the position to utilize these educative experiences to teach a variety of student learning outcomes. In adopting the belief of Dewey (1938) that not all experiences are educative, student affairs professionals are encouraged to ensure that these experiences conform to a proven educational philosophy. Professionals who adopt the eight principles of good practice espoused by the National Society for Experiential Education should find that they are promoting a more fully formed educational experience.

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