

Book Review

Experiential Education: Making the Most of Learning Outside the Classroom

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Citation: Qualters, Donna M., (Ed). (2010). *Experiential Education: Making the Most of Learning Outside the Classroom*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Number 124, Catherine M. Wehlburg, Editor-in-Chief. Winter 2010. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 978-0-470-94505-6.

Publisher Description: As the cost of education increases, endowments decline, and the job market tightens, institutions of higher education are faced with many challenges. How do we remain relevant in a world many still view us as the “ivory tower”? If we bring in the outside world, how do we convince our own faculty of its value in the classroom? How do we help students combine that exposure with the deep reflection that will give them the knowledge and skills necessary for their future?

Experiential Education: Making the Most of Learning Outside the Classroom is intended to aid administrators, faculty and staff in the design, construction, assessment, and funding of experiential education. From descriptions of individual courses to the layout of entire programs, these writers address the realities of experiential learning – the need to reflect upon its lessons and engage colleagues in understanding its power.

Whether you are a beginner, a regular practitioner, or a field expert in experiential education, this book is a good read for you. From the definitions and descriptions in the preliminary sections to the discussions and analyses at the end, the chapters here provide an informative, and sometimes provocative, look at the state of experiential education in the academy today.

The first chapter presents simple definitions and brief discussions of the most predominant forms of experiential education and although some might seem unnecessary or tedious to the seasoned practitioner, the concluding discussion is worth working through the preliminary sections. The author raises compelling questions about the role and relevance of experiential education in students’ scholastic portfolios, while posing similar questions about their relationship to the vision and mission of colleges and universities today. However, the chapter concludes as many articles of this nature do: the overall success, value, and relevance of experiential education hinge on the amount of planning, preparation, and supervision that occur in support of thoughtful reflection by our students. The latter is, in the end, most impactful.

Chapter two presents three ways to operationalize the positive pedagogical attributes of experiential education: direct service-learning, project-based service-learning, and community-based research. Each is described and discussed in reasonable depth, with specific details included for implementation of programs and projects. Chapters three and four continue by taking on niche curricula for which experiential education is particularly well suited – study

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abroad and the performing arts. Chapter three is of special interest because it exalts out the most challenging aspects of study abroad in general (risk management, the under representation of certain groups, faculty roles and responsibilities), then explores the additional considerations of experiential education in particular. Chapter four is most noteworthy for its discussion of discipline-specific adaptation of the experiential education pedagogy, and its excellent illustration through the *Laramie Project*. This multi-faceted, immersive educational experience is a wonderful example of everything that is right with experiential education and all that can be achieved through its application.

Chapter five's topic is work-based learning, but its real focus is the epistemological infrastructure of higher learning. This chapter is especially interesting because much of its content and analyses are applicable to experiential learning in general. The implications of its findings are compelling when assessing the real value of immersive experiences by considering the learning styles and dispositions of our students.

Chapter six shifts focus to the ethical predicaments students find themselves in as they engage in experiential education, the provocative thesis being that students easily become ethically disenfranchised while working on site. This chapter explores the reasons for this, and how it may be avoided through the adoption of best practices.

Chapter seven offers insight into the challenge of assessing experiential education, and does so in simple terms and common sense explanations. The author writes knowledgeably of the 'assessment loop' and the unique ways it expresses itself in immersive learning. In a kind of Zen-like conclusion, the author of this chapter, and the editor of this book, writes that "In assessment, there are no conclusions, just ongoing questions that the data raise about learning and the process of learning." The last sentence of this 'non-conclusion,' however, is what becomes important about this chapter:

With a clear consideration of design that goes beyond perceptions and into documenting learning, by developing new tools to capture praxis and by using a multi-pronged approach that engages faculty in identifying and designing methods to answer their burning questions, experiential learning can move from the periphery of learning to demonstrating that learning beyond the classroom is a central component of education in higher education (p.61).

Funding experiential education in tight economic times is discussed in Chapter eight, with Merrimack College in Boston used as a working example. From planning to implementation to evaluation, each step of the model followed is showcased in this concise, well organized discussion. Although what works at one school will not automatically work at others, the components and protocols described in this chapter present good guides for creating one's own model. Chapter nine presents three more examples of the adoption of and adaptation to experiential education – this time models for the institutionalization of experiential education. Organized in three parts, this chapter reviews the various approaches taken by different institutions to integrating meaningful immersive experiences into their existing course delivery systems. Perhaps the most interesting experience is that related by the faculty and staff at Purdue Calumet who not only appealed to the Kolb model in building their program, but literally employed the model as an organizational guide for their own planning process.

The final two chapters of the book round out the instructional assistance afforded by the book by offering suggestions for building strong curriculum and good courses. Chapter ten takes on the creation of successful programs through thoughtful and concerted planning, while Chapter

eleven addresses perhaps the most important aspect of experiential education – reflection. In each chapter, concepts and conclusions are well supported by field research, making the suggestions more like directives that will result in best practices. Chapter eleven is again authored by the editor of the book and serves as an assimilative and concluding piece for the entire collection of chapters. But it is also an excellent review of the critical components of reflection – ones that the authors employs herself as she thoughtfully moves through her own experience of bringing the publication together.

Experiential Education: Making the Most of Learning Outside the Classroom meets the expectations for works included in the New Directions for Teaching and Learning series: It ‘informs readers about current and future directions’ in postsecondary education, ‘illuminates the context that shapes these new directions,’ ‘illustrates these new directions through examples from real settings, and ‘proposes ways in which these new directions can be incorporated into still other setting.’ Even though the majority of institutions discussed were from the Boston area, the chapter content was nonetheless interesting, informative and enlightening.