

## Global Perspective on Experiential Learning

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The underlying premise of the experiential learning philosophy is that students learn best through educational experiences which are driven by hands-on engagement and reflections on these experiences. As it relates to graduate learning, experiential learning is a process through which students develop knowledge, skills, and values from direct experiences outside a traditional lecture-based setting. Learning through experience is not a new concept for the higher education classroom. Most notably, John Dewey (1938), Piaget (1970), Carl Rogers (1983), and David Kolb (1984), to name a few, have provided the foundation for experiential learning in the context of learning theories. From the perspective of graduate teacher education, experiential learning encompasses a variety of activities including internships, research, and work experiences in educational settings. Well-planned, supervised and assessed experiential learning opportunities can stimulate academic inquiry so that the knowledge acquired in the classroom setting can then gain relevance. In this issue of *Global Education Review*, we have examined various research studies that have engaged the broad topic of experiential learning.

In “The Use of Video Self-Monitoring Embedded with Mentorship,” Lina Slim-Topdjian, who has seen the increasing

enrollment of children with autism in school settings, believes that “teachers must incorporate specialized teaching strategies to address the unique educational and behavioral challenges facing children diagnosed with autism.” In the article, Slim-Topdjian first highlights the important role that experiential learning opportunities play in bridging the link between didactic coursework and on the job training. Then, relying upon the data gathered by observing six female teachers instructing three to five-year-old children with autism, she advocates the benefits of video self-monitoring (VSM) and mentoring to enhance teacher performance. Interestingly, Slim-Topdjian’s data reveal that teachers who combined VSM with mentoring showed the “greatest and most consistent improvement” as opposed to those who did not.

In “Rocket to Creativity,” Dole, Bloom and Doss make their case for the importance of connecting classroom based theory to practice in teacher education; the goal of field experience, after all, the authors argue, is for teachers to change their practice from didactic to inquiry in order “to promote critical and creative thinking

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in their students.” In particular, they “examine the impact of a field experience in problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning (PjBL) on pre-service and in-service teachers’ conceptions of experiential learning. Their study focused on a field experience on a university campus in which teachers worked in collaborative teams and where instructors and facilitators experienced in PBL and PjBL were available to provide thoughtful and timely feedback; however, the authors posit that even teachers who do not have access to experienced instructors and facilitators could turn the dearth of resources into advantages if they engage in PBL and PjBL.

In “A Connected Space for Early Experiential Learning in Teacher Education”, authors Yu and Hunt explore some of the more subtle factors that influence the outcomes of even the more carefully constructed field-based experiences in teacher education programs. Their setting is Project CONNECT (PC), an innovative after-school program initiated by the collaborative efforts of university-based teacher education programs and a local school district to create early experiential learning opportunities for pre-service teachers. The observations of Yu and Hunt are broadly consistent with several earlier studies which have indicated how “an after-school program which was established as a required component of education courses for pre-service teachers and which took place in a school building would have positive impact on the transformation of pre-service teachers’ identity, skills and dispositions.” However, the authors argue that such impact was not related merely to the built-in features of such a program but also greatly influenced by logistical factors such as the previous knowledge and ability of the pre-service teachers and also the support and feedback built in to the after-school program.

In “Implementation and Impact of Experiential Learning in a Graduate Level Teacher Education Program: An Example from a Canadian University” authors Hill and MacDonald express the value of experiential learning but apparent lack in empirical evidence demonstrating if and how a particular pedagogical methodology can move teachers toward actual transformation of teaching practice. Their study begins with acquiring a sample of twelve portfolios at the end of the semester, across two cohorts, Learning in the Early Years and Supporting Diverse Learners. Teachers are asked to demonstrate their growth by writing learning statements which are then analyzed using in vivo coding methods that allow the authors to systematically assign categories to the portfolio data that are probed for demonstration of transformation of teaching practice. They highlight the value in this process, which allows broader focus on the overall teacher experience and process rather than content. While the authors highlight the value of understanding the transformation process on teaching practice, they conclude that understanding the impact of teacher inquiry on the environments that serve as learning sites for those teachers is of equal importance and warrants further understanding.

In “Free Operant Field Experiences,” Lee Mason makes the case for using observations in a “ShaperSpace” to augment the training of special education teachers to address the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The idea of ShaperSpace was inspired by a model of field experience called “MakerSpaces,” organizations in which members sharing similar interests in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) gather to work on select projects. The distinguishing characteristic that separates the ShaperSpace from other models of field experience is the

emphasis on free-operant conditioning. By differentially reinforcing free-operant responses, the ShaperSpace accelerates the evolutionary process of learning. “Both evolution and behavior are predicated on a cycle of repetition, variation and selection.” To promote repetition, ShaperSpaces use inquiry-based instruction to make the most important features of teacher/child interactions more relevant. Variation is achieved by emphasizing functional outcomes over structural form, and selection is done by the PBAs who come into contact with natural contingencies of their behavior. Ultimately, Mason explains, ShaperSpace reverse engineers outcome to methodology to maximize variation and promote selection by consequences.

Mukeredzi provides an international perspective to the discussion by examining teacher training in the context of the Zimbabwean government’s efforts to provide Education for All (EFA). In “Teacher Professional Development Outside the Lecture Room,” Mukeredzi explores the professional development experiences of Professionally Unqualified Practicing Teachers (PUPT) in rural secondary schools, and concludes that PUPTs primarily experience their learning outside of Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) through interactions that are non-formal, informal and experiential. Zimbabwean PUPTs, the author explains, are practicing, possess content knowledge from undergraduate degrees, and have teaching experience; however, they do not have a professional teaching qualification. Lacking the formal teaching training, the development of PUPTs is enhanced greatly from supervisory support and formal feedback from school management. Since not all Zimbabwean rural school systems have the resources to provide supervisory feedback, Mukeredzi argues for schools to build in programs that constantly

and tenaciously bring teachers together to promote professional learning from peer to peer interactions. Finally, the author highlights the benefits that teachers gain from teacher-parent interactions, and observes that these interactions are essential to the professional development of Zimbabwean PUPTs.

Craig Willey and Paula Magee, in “Clinical Experiences and Mediation Activities in Urban Teacher Preparation: Learning and Critical Consciousness,” explore the topic of urban teacher development in their two-year field-based training program. Specifically, they discuss how clinical experiences (CEs), when augmented with corresponding mediational activities, augment the development of prospective teachers (PTs) in their pursuit of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for urban teaching. Willey and Magee make it abundantly clear that the CEs do not automatically lead to deeper knowledge of children or the development of critical consciousness amongst the PTs; however, their data lead them to believe that the overall effect was positive, and that the challenging CEs led to growth towards culturally relevant teaching practices. This was particularly true when the CEs were accompanied in tandem with thoughtful and skillful mediation. Critical teacher educators, the authors argue, “must assume responsibility to monitor the PEs as well as extract the benefits from and thrive within the environments within which the PTs operate.

In “Thinking as Someone Else,” Helge Wasmuth discusses the learnings from a fledgling alternative learning project that was conducted in an online course at a teacher education program over a three-year period. Since it is impossible to simulate all the complex realities that occur in every day classrooms, the teacher educators used experiential learning methods to simulate teaching moments with the

prospective teachers. As part of the online course, the students were asked to create avatars, and think and act as their avatars when faced with challenges. By experiencing what it means to be someone else, the program hoped that prospective teachers would better understand the ambiguity of educational issues and that the role matters in making decisions. However, Wasmuth shares how several prospective teachers struggle to “stay within character” because they “simply decided to think as their opposites” or were simply unable to articulate their difficulty. Despite the challenges, the author seems intellectually open to the view “that the whole project is a meaningful way to go beyond traditional learning” but concludes that the avatar project is one approach that has to be proven to be successful.

In “Out of My Comfort Zone: Understanding the Impact of a Service-Learning Experience in Rural El Salvador”, Paula J. Beckman and Lea Ann Christenson present the findings from a “qualitative case study designed to explore the impact of a two-week service-learning experience in El Salvador on students’ perceptions of its impact on them personally, professionally, and their global awareness.” From a personal development standpoint, the study abroad experience was carefully structured to interact with faculty that accompanied them and to maximize contacts with local communities. For instance, faculty stayed alongside students with a host family, shared meals with students and provided guest lectures along the way. On the personal development front, the authors observed that the experience “helped pre service teachers develop multicultural awareness and skills while working with children – skills that the potential to inform future professional practice.” Beckman and Christenson also posit that immersion in foreign environments has the power to influence

students’ adaptability, a skill that is crucial for teachers and social service professionals. Finally, the authors found that the study abroad program had an impact on students’ level of global awareness.

In “Immersing Teacher Candidates in Experiential Learning: Cohorts, Learning Communities, and Mentoring,” Jordan Jay and Howard Miller critique three existing models of teacher preparation programs that immersed their candidates in experiential learning, and then propose a potentially more sustainable model. The authors examine three existing models of experiential learning programs – those involving cohort groups, learning communities, and mentoring” -- and grant that the current approaches are successful in developing “high quality beginning teachers”. However, they assert that these programs are unsustainable in the long run when financial support for new teachers is tapered or reduced and due to the shifting needs/priorities of the school districts to address topically urgent needs. Recognizing the important role of experiential learning, the authors argue that academic programs should integrate more experiential modules in their curriculum and that school districts should offer specialized programs to assist beginning teachers through partnerships with teaching preparation programs. Jay and Miller claim that “it would require very little expenditure of time or money to establish such requirements,” but by so mandating, school districts would allow the new teachers to develop “de facto cohort and learning communities” by themselves. Not only would such a program capture the essential elements of cohorts, learning communities and mentoring, they would be self-sustaining.

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