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College Experience and Real World Experience:

What is the purpose of education?

by Nancy Kleniewski



Photograph by David Wilson

In 1916 John Dewey wrote that the formal education of his day encouraged students to be passive, focused on cognitive skills to the exclusion of other abilities, and discouraged students from reflecting on or making judgments about ideas. Dewey thought that genuine learning could take place only when people focused their attention and energies on solving genuine dilemmas. He argued that before students could think, they had to experience something. Only when they saw that their actions had consequences could they reflect on the relationship between those actions and abstract ideas.

Dewey's critique sounds all too familiar to some contemporary students and professors who feel frustrated by focusing on dry facts and theories disconnected from real life. A number of faculty members, including some at Bridgewater, have devised ways of using real-world experiences to enhance student learning. Such "experiential learning" encompasses a variety of activities including internships, service learning, foreign study tours, and field research.

In experiential education, the activities in which students engage are not simply enhancements to their education but are an integral part of their education. When students perform unpaid work as interns, conduct research for clients, or volunteer on service projects, they have an opportunity to participate in the genuine learning that Dewey advocated. What they are studying and learning really matters to them because they are analyzing real problems and trying to solve them. Involvement in issues outside of the classroom helps students create coherence in their education. It encourages them to make connections between the knowledge they gain in different places and different times and to apply it in tangible ways to real events. Unlike cramming facts for an exam and quickly forgetting them, these learning experiences engage students on multiple levels and help them incorporate the knowledge in deeper, longer-lasting ways.

The fact that students can learn in different (and some would argue superior) ways based on real world experiences is not the only factor sparking an increased inter-

est in experiential education. Most colleges and universities include in their mission statements their commitment to community service. State-related institutions such as Bridgewater base that commitment on two factors: we are supported by public funds and we exist to serve the citizens of the state. Many forms of experiential education are directly tied to such a service mission.

Take, for example, the current debate about civil society. According to some observers, contemporary life in our culture is plagued by an unraveling of civil society, the absence of social bonds among groups, and a sense of atomism. In venues from political science journals to the nightly news, observers discuss the social ills of a lack of community. The popular press reports incidents of highway rage and children left home alone while academic studies report on increases in one-person households and people bowling alone. In fact, the title of the well-known book *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam has become a kind of shorthand for the unraveling of civil society.

At the same time, there is a growing body of work on factors that can strengthen civil society, especially focusing on what is usually called "social capital." Social capital consists of social ties, social norms, bonds of trust, and other organizational features that help groups create and maintain cohesion. Putnam himself as well as other researchers have pointed out that communities with strong social ties among residents tend to have strong political and economic institutions as well. One important component of social capital is agency, or the ability to make a difference in the world. Some recent research points out that simply being a member of an organization does not necessarily give people a sense of efficacy. If people identify with a group and work collectively to solve problems, however, they can replace feelings of powerlessness with effectiveness and learn the habit of participating in public life.

Colleges and universities that encourage experiential learning can contribute to and support social capital in their surrounding communities. In a growing number of college communities, including Bridgewater, teams of faculty, students, and residents work together on research devoted to solving problems and improving the quality of life. This teamwork provides valuable learn-

ing to community members, especially when they are treated as partners in the research rather than as subjects of the research. It can also help reduce feelings of helplessness and contribute to community cohesion.

Students engaged in such real-world experiences, too, benefit from their engagement with the community. Engaging in experiential education can be a powerfully transformative moment for students, assisting their intellectual development by giving meaning to their education. As a faculty member, I regularly heard from students such statements as, “I learned more in that one [internship/research project/service learning project] than in all my coursework put together.” Initially dismayed by that statement, I learned to recognize that allowing students to apply their knowledge off campus helps them mature as learners and encourages them to take responsibility for their own development as scholars. The students also gain a sense of pride as they move from being recipients of knowledge to contributors.

Public institutions of higher education should have a special interest in real-world learning. In addition to fostering the intellectual development of young people and perhaps some sense that we should help them learn practical skills, public institutions also have an obligation to educate future citizens. Although the term may sound old-fashioned, there is currently a renewed interest in and commitment to education for civic virtue. Widely read publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* have published articles arguing that institutions of higher education are responsible for educating citizens to be thoughtful, active participants in the nation’s political and civic life.

Higher education can influence students’ civic identities because developmental psychologists suggest that adolescence is a critical period for developing a sense of citizenship. Opportunities to participate in off-campus organizations and projects during high school and college can,

they hold, help young people develop lifelong values and character traits such as honesty, justice, social responsibility, and tolerance. These traits encourage students to value citizenship and to make positive contributions to civic life as adults.

Service learning programs are a particularly good way of making connections between students and community groups. Service learning consists of participation in organized projects that meet identified community needs while permitting the students to reflect on their activities in a way that furthers their understanding of course material. In service learning programs, students may provide direct services to populations in need or they may perform research, education, advocacy, or outreach for such groups.

Service learning is different from both volunteer work and internships. It differs from volunteer activity because it is structured so the service is part of the curriculum, not an extra- or co-curricular experience. In service learning courses, community service is integrated into credit-bearing coursework so the service activity is a learning opportunity related to other assignments. Students are encouraged to reflect on how the learning they gain in the classroom affects and is affected by their community experience. Service learning differs from internships because internships are pre-professional experiences in which students prepare for future careers. Although it is possible that students might subsequently enter a profession related to their volunteer



BSC students participated in a Spring Break Habitat for Humanity project in Florida in 2001.

experience, their status in a service-learning project is that of an educated amateur rather than a junior professional. Many service-learning projects are conducted in teams of students, often from different majors with different skills and interests, so the students have the opportunity to learn from each other and to develop as a team, fostering a sense of social responsibility.

As an example, participation in a Habitat for Humanity project could be done as volunteer work, as an internship, or as service learning. As volunteer work, the type of participation probably most familiar to us, students would donate time as laborers to help build a Habitat house in the spirit of community service. As an internship, a student in marketing could develop a marketing campaign for Habitat to apply his or her classroom knowledge and gain practical professional experience. As a service-learning project, students could work in teams to assist families about to move into Habitat houses, to help develop ways of making the houses more environmentally efficient, to develop an outreach program for Habitat to recruit volunteers, or any other set of activities that would be useful for Habitat and provide a learning experience for the students.

Carefully constructed service learning projects can open students to many civic issues of which they would otherwise be unaware. When I lived in upstate New York, I was asked by a relief agency to recruit a team of students to conduct focus group research on refugees' experiences being resettled in Rochester. My team of three students had to learn not only how to conduct focus groups but also something about the cultures of Bosnia, Haiti, and Viet Nam, (the three countries from which large numbers of refugees were going to Rochester) how to deal with resettlement bureaucracies, and probably most significantly, how to adopt a division of labor and ensure that all the work was accomplished. Because they were accountable to an outside agency, they knew that their deadlines were real and that their product would have an immediate impact on people's lives. In their reflections on the project, the students stressed how much they matured as people and how much they learned about refugees, a population previously invisible to them as middle-class, suburban students.

One other aspect of experiential education appeals to me greatly: it can make faculty work more collaborative and integrated. Traditional research, especially in the humanities and social sciences, tends to encourage a

faculty member to carve out a niche shared with a few other colleagues around the nation or the world rather than to engage with others on the same campus or in the community. Even when a faculty member is a good teacher and a productive scholar, it is easy to become isolated in one's own classroom, lab, or library.

Experiential education, on the contrary, encourages faculty to work in teams, to collaborate with colleagues in different disciplines, and to extend their expertise to the surrounding community. It encourages and demands that faculty learn from students about how to integrate action components into coursework. It helps faculty stretch the boundaries of their own intellectual inquiries and broaden out rather than narrow in on their areas of interest.

Experiential education can also contribute to faculty satisfaction by helping faculty members integrate the disparate demands of teaching, scholarship, and service that are expected in the profession. Rather than feeling frustrated and pulled in three ways, faculty members can build on their scholarly interests by incorporating them into their classes in a way that provides active learning for their students and a valuable service for an off-campus constituency.

Since joining the Bridgewater community last summer, I have learned that many BSC faculty members incorporate experiential education into their courses. Space will not permit me to list here all of the individual faculty members who are contributing to experiential education, but I am in the process of collecting the information and would welcome any contributions. I hope we can publicize the extent of Bridgewater's community engagements, including service learning, applied and interdisciplinary research, internships, collaborations with K-12 schools, professional development for off-campus clients, performances, exhibits, study tours, economic development projects, and other experiences. I extend my congratulations to those who already use this powerful learning tool and encourage others to "experiment with experience."

—Nancy Kleniewski is Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. This contribution is adapted from her article, "Changing Communities and Changing Universities: Why Should We Care? What Can We Do?" In *Community Politics and Policy*, edited by Nancy Kleniewski and Gordana Rabrenovic, JAI Press, 1999.