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Teaching Note - The Classroom as the World: Understanding the Value of Experiential Learning

Lisa M. Litterio

Bridgewater State University, lisa.litterio@bridgew.edu

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The Classroom as the World: Understanding the Value of Experiential Learning

Lisa M. Litterio

Experiential learning appeals to Bridgewater State students, whose lives consist of balancing rigorous course loads with full-time work and familial obligations. Experiential learning is exactly as it sounds: learning by experience. Learning by doing. It is a paradigm shift, requiring our students not to compartmentalize their lives between school and work, extracurricular and familial obligations; to seize opportunities to direct their own learning, make their own knowledge, and apply it. Bridgewater fosters this kind of learning and application of knowledge through its many internships, study abroad offerings,

and practicums, but experiential learning can also happen with strategic classroom pedagogy. It can be a lens to reshape assignments and syllabi. My goals in this article are first to provide an understanding of experiential learning, then demonstrate two examples of experiential learning in classroom assignments to illustrate this concept as well as suggest ways to integrate this kind of teaching at Bridgewater.

Experiential learning was championed by early theorists in the field of education, nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers such as John Dewey, David Kolb, and Carl Rogers. More than a decade ago, L. Dee Fink defined experiential learning as a “paradigm of significant learning” that supports multiple learning objectives for students, including shaping their own knowledge through experience (*Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, 2003). More recently, educators Scott Wurdinger and Julie Carlson also encouraged instructors to involve their students

“in the learning process through discussion, group work, hands-on participation, [and] applying information outside the classroom” (*Teaching for Experiential Learning*, 2010). At its core, experiential learning calls for us to envision the classroom differently. Rather than a fixed, physical location of desks and whiteboards, the classroom is the world: it is a summer internship, a trip to the grocery store, a carefully crafted assignment. Experiential learning not only invites us to reimagine the classroom, but also reconsider what constitutes learning and the formation of knowledge. It calls students to be the agents of their education—to learn by doing, discovering, reflecting and applying. This kind of learning, Fink explains, does not have one end goal; instead, its taxonomy spans six different areas of learning (see Figure 1), including “foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn.”

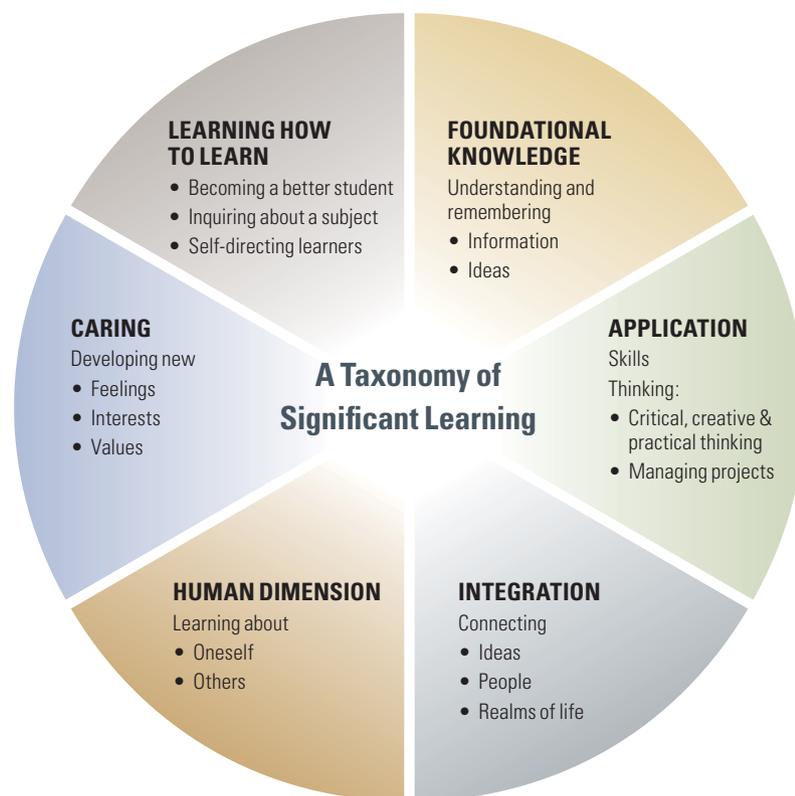


Figure 1. L. Dee Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning, detailing 6 areas of learning (from Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* [2003]).

Today, “technology” is the buzzword in higher education with discussions centering on MOOCs (massive online open courses) and online/hybrid pedagogy. But experiential learning does not require new technology: it can be as refreshingly low-tech as building a chair. To provide some context, one of the courses I teach is English 201: Technical Writing. In this course, students consider how to write and deliver specialized (that is, “technical”) information to non-technical or general audiences. One of the most common examples of a technical document is a manual; it can be a physical manual for, say, a coffee maker or an electronic one, such as a PDF detailing how to use the latest iPhone. Designing a manual is a crucial part of technical writing because it relies on teaching students about audience, purpose, and clear content. Before students can design their own manuals, I encourage them to discover what that process is like by following instructions of a pre-existing manual. In this case, I use a manual from IKEA, and my 20 students are charged with the task of following these instructions to build a ready-to-assemble wooden chair. They are not building the chair because I need additional furniture in my home or office. They are building a

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chair to learn to think and write like a technical writer. But I do not tell them so. I want them to discover that for themselves.

The challenge is that IKEA’s manuals, as the illustration below (Figure 2) shows, contain a series of images and graphics, with little or no text. Adhering to the philosophy of experiential learning, I invited students in my Spring semester 2014 ENGL 201 class to brainstorm on how we should divide our labor. We decided that we would need a project manager and a team of

builders. These students also spoke of the necessity for a team of writers who would observe their building process—and discuss what mode (text, verbal, visual) would be necessary to elaborate and represent various steps. One student suggested building the chair outside to have more space, and other students quickly agreed. Students spent the next 50 minutes building a chair, discussing and interpreting the IKEA manual as they assembled the chair with efficiency and precision. The one tool I provided them, a three-pronged screw driver, did not have a Phillips head, so they were almost unable to complete the final steps. Several students said that it was “hopeless” that they could finish, while others realized they were so close to a finished chair were not ready to give up. To complete their chair, one of the students ran to the nearby Art Building to borrow the correct screwdriver from an art instructor.

The students showed resourcefulness and perseverance as they shared aloud their process and as the manual writers observed, offered feedback, and collaborated to produce a revised document. This was not only experiential learning in progress, but it is also how I teach writing. Writing, too, involves discussion, collaboration, revising, and refinement. At the end

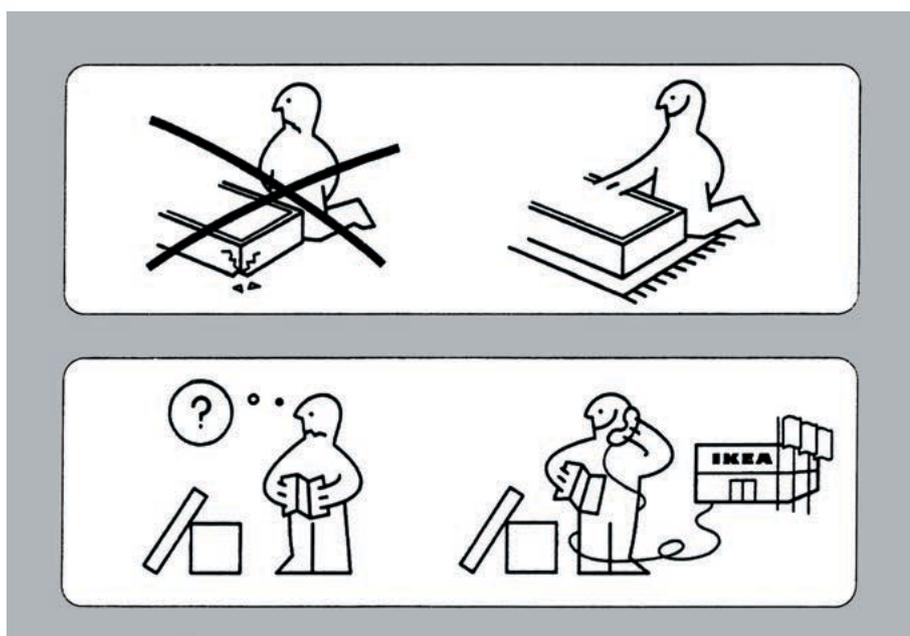


Figure 2. Example of instructions from a typical IKEA manual

of this 50-minute class session, I had much more than a completed chair; I had a group of students who had willingly taken part in a pedagogical experiment, a lesson of experiential learning. This lesson resulted in a class more connected by this shared experience and students who realized that the ownership of teaching and learning and applying information is not in the hands of a singular person, but part of a collaborative effort.

In experiential learning, learning by doing leads to the questions of “Now what?” and “So what?” According to C. Haynes’s *Experiential Learning* (2007), “Students are encouraged to connect this experience to a real-life situation and apply what they learned in this experience to a similar or different

I include disclaimers or other notations? Do I include both text and images, or only one of them?

For their own projects, I invite students to write their manuals for any user, but let them know that as their instructor, I will complete the steps listed and evaluate them on the clarity of their instructions. And so, in past semesters, I baked an orange cake, played Fantasy Football, and even attempted to change my own brake pads based on the documents that students submitted. Here is the beauty of experiential learning: it’s not one-sided. It encourages instructors to guide students in their own learning process, allowing them to experiment and discover. It also invites the instructor to be part of a shared experience that fosters not only a strong sense of

Island. In other disciplines, experiential learning could involve students creating art to illustrate a mathematical equation, developing maps from spaces they visit for a geography class, or conducting interviews with grocery store customers for a marketing project.

Experiential learning also encourages us to reconsider what we mean by the classroom. At Bridgewater, students already take part in study abroad programs, hold internships, and undertake service-learning projects. Yet, how can we integrate sites of study and exploration as part of the classroom? How can we extend the classroom as a site of learning? Even within the confines of a course syllabus, instructors can question how our material, our understanding of our world, is influenced by experiential learning practices. One of the ways in which Bridgewater supports this practice is through the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR). Each semester, funding is allocated to faculty applicants through course-embedded research grants—funds that support students in their research, reimbursement for classes to travel off campus, or for supplies. Last semester, OUR provided a grant for my English course, “Writing for the Public: The Art of Persuasion” (ENGL 389), a course that explores how writing can influence people to reconsider viewpoints, discover common ground, compromise, or even create policy change. As the culminating project in ENGL 389, students were invited to consider how public writing extends to memorials and monuments as sites of writing, speech, and memory. This assignment not only encourages students to analyze and consider a memorial in a public space to develop a thoughtful and articulate rhetorical analysis of the space, it also requires students to experience a physical place. We visited the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston.

ENGL 389 class members traveled to Boston on a Friday afternoon in April. We spent time together as a class not

Here is the beauty of experiential learning: it encourages instructors to guide students in their own learning process, allowing them to experiment and discover. It also invites the instructor to be part of a shared experience that fosters not only a strong sense of community, but also student autonomy.

experience.” Technical writers are often required to write manuals and user-friendly directions. Because students experienced building a chair from an unclear pictograph, they applied that knowledge in their own manual-writing process, asking themselves questions such as: How do I make this step clear to the reader? What kinds of terms do I need to define? What equipment or materials are necessary? Should

community, but also student autonomy. Beyond the technical writing classroom, I see students drawing from the experience, whether it is writing a series of instructions necessary for a visitor watching their cats while they are away from home or, with respect to the more life-threatening cases we study, crafting technical documentation relating to the Challenger Explosion, aviation crises, or the nuclear crisis at Three Mile



Figure 3. Author (back row, left) with students from ENGL 389 in Boston. (Author's photo)

analyzing or evaluating images in a textbook or on a computer screen, but analyzing exterior spaces in person. The students who went to Boston presented their own theses and arguments about the memorial they encountered at the Undergraduate Research Symposium on April 28, 2014. Their experience was of more than just visiting a research site to conduct fieldwork, interviews with observers, and fellow classmates; they also disseminated that research to a wider audience that consisted of members of the BSU community. They cultivated what Fink considers the human dimension of experiential learning, as they learned of the atrocities of the Holocaust and pondered the quotations from personal accounts. They also learned about cultural significance, as they observed the small stones that are routinely piled on the entryway to the memorial. One student of Jewish



Figure 4. Students in author's ENGL 389 course take part in experiential learning as they view, interact, observe, and document the space in the New England Holocaust Memorial, Boston. (Author's photo)

heritage shared with the class that stones are often left on Jewish graves to symbolize the permanence of a person or event. Consisting of six glass towers representing each concentration camp, the Memorial was a physical site with which students interacted. They all considered carefully how the Memorial was constructed and positioned, but also how viewers interacted with the space. They noted that many people seemed to walk right by and not even realize the solemnity of the space. A few peered through the metal floors to see smoke and lights flicker, reminiscent of the Gas Chambers, according to the designer's vision.

world, and that our role is to facilitate and cultivate opportunities for students to be self-learners. Experiential learning requires us to reflect on what we teach and the way we teach it, examining our syllabi and assignments, and engaging in conversations with other faculty about our teaching practices. As educator Larry Spence summarizes, "We won't meet the needs for more and better higher education until professors become designers of learning experiences and not teachers" (Fink, 2003). Following Spence, let us craft and shape learning opportunities that best serve our students at Bridgewater and beyond.

What I am encouraging... is that we help our students see that there is no singular divide between academia and the real world, and that our role is to facilitate and cultivate opportunities for students to be self-learners.

Experiential learning is exactly what it sounds like: experiencing something. Visiting a site of memory—the New England Holocaust Memorial—invites students not only to experience how societies negotiate memory, but to examine how the memorial interacts with them, other viewers, and its context of Boston. Building a chair, when presented as a way to learn about the necessary skills of a technical writer, also invites students to see themselves as professionals, collaborators, and problem-solvers in a real-world task. What I am encouraging, and what proponents of experiential learning are exhorting us to do, is that we help our students see that there is no singular divide between academia and the real



Lisa Litterio is Assistant Professor in the Department of English.