

AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF CRIMINOLOGY, JUVENILE DELINQUENCY, AND SOCIAL DEVIANCE*

NORMAN GREENBERG

Westfield State College

According to Kolb, learning must include an experiential component if it is to be most effective. This paper describes a program that makes it possible to incorporate experiential learning conveniently into the teaching of criminology, juvenile delinquency, social deviance, and related subjects. The program, called Discovery, has been used for five years as the basis for a pair of criminal justice classes at a state college in western Massachusetts. The program enables undergraduates to conduct a series of interviews and group discussions with jail inmates and incarcerated juvenile delinquents.

In recent years numerous authors have emphasized the importance of direct experience in stimulating interest in a subject and in generating and testing hypotheses. In sociology, Glaser and Strauss (1969) discussed the importance of field experience for the generation and evaluation of sociological theory. Other sociologists also have recognized the value of field experience for teaching sociology (DeMartini 1983; Forster and Prinz 1988; Takata and Leiting 1987).

The general notion that field experience and abstract learning are mutually reinforcing is expressed most influentially by the learning theorist David Kolb (1984). Kolb postulates a four-stage cyclical process of learning: concrete learning is the first stage, reflective observation the second, abstract conceptualization the third, and active experimentation the fourth. Commenting on Kolb's analysis, Sugarman (1985, p. 264) writes, "Effective or comprehensive learning requires flexibility. Learners must shift from being actors to being observers and from being directly involved to being analytically detached." Another supporter of Kolb's analysis, Adolph Crew states:

When knowledge is learned in relation to use in actual situations, that knowledge becomes more permanent, functional, and transferable. The best teaching-learning situation is the proper blend of actual and vicarious experiences, of

theory and practice, each enriching the other (1987, p. 147).

Kolb also inspired this statement by Duley and Permaul:

Too frequently, classroom instruction engages students in observation (mostly second-hand information), some reflection, and lots of theories. Seldom do students have opportunities to assimilate independently a collection of experiences or data requiring them to formulate their own system of observing, not to mention opportunities to generalize from the information gathered (1984, p. 19).

Duley and Permaul point out that students whose education includes all phases of the learning cycle are more likely to recognize the practical value of their studies, to ask questions, and to participate in classroom discussions (1984, pp. 19-20). Research has also shown that the inclusion of concrete experience in the learning process improves the comprehension and retention of what is studied (Specht 1985).

These ideas suggest that all learning is enhanced by concrete experience; yet certain subjects are not studied in this way as easily as others. The subjects presenting the greatest apparent difficulties in this regard include the most popular areas in the sociological curriculum: social deviance, criminology, juvenile delinquency, and related subjects. How can the mass of students receive the chance to have some kind of concrete experience along these lines? Furthermore, how can this experience be made sufficiently detailed so that the information can be analyzed critically and sufficiently brief to be made part of a learning sequence that also includes the study of theory?

* Mentioned throughout this paper is a set of books collectively referred to as "the Discovery books." Anyone interested in obtaining copies of these books should contact Whistling Press, P.O. Box 1152, Westfield, MA 01086. I also welcome inquiries from anyone interested in designing courses or organizing programs like the one described in this article.

One answer is a program that has existed in western Massachusetts since 1982. The program, called Discovery, has enabled large numbers of undergraduate college students to engage in a series of wide-ranging interviews and group discussions with jail inmates and incarcerated juvenile delinquents while engaged in a full program of classroom study.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Discovery Program consists of a series of on-site meetings, each lasting a total of two hours. Each meeting is divided into two hour-long parts; the first is an interview and the second is a group discussion.

At the beginning of the first meeting, a group of students (from about 5 to 18, depending on the size of the facility) arrives at the facility. After a brief orientation, each student is introduced to a client by a staff member or an instructor. Student-client partners then go to separate rooms or corners of a large meeting room (again, this arrangement depends on the facility); there, after a brief introduction, an interview begins. In conducting the interview, students are guided by a long questionnaire printed as a pamphlet (*The Discovery Book I* 1987). After an hour has passed, five or six student-client pairs (10 to 12 people) form a circle and begin a group discussion, using as a guide another long questionnaire printed as a pamphlet (*The Discovery Book II* 1987). In the group meeting, a participant volunteers to read and then to answer a question; everyone else answers, going around the circle. Then another person volunteers to read and answer another question, everyone else answers that question, and so on. In general, questions asked in the group meetings are less personal and more concerned with attitudes than are questions guiding the private meetings.

Clients already may have been told by a staff member that the Discovery Program is "something like a course in which college students will ask you a lot of questions about your life and your opinions on things," but a student also will explain, "I am doing this as part of a course. We will go through these books together. I will ask you questions in this book. By asking these questions, I can find out a lot about you and you might learn something about yourself. Do you want to try it?"

Surprisingly, both the inmates and the

delinquents in the facilities where the program has been initiated have responded readily to this simple, straightforward approach. Nearly all the clients seem willing to give it a try. Though some have trouble expressing themselves clearly and a few express initial suspicion, they seem to be hungry for a chance to express themselves—to reach out to someone not connected to the criminal justice system who might be interested in hearing about their experiences and opinions and who has the added advantage of being young. Even the suspicious-acting inmates usually come around after a meeting or two, though occasionally a rare individual opts to drop out of the program.

In one of the three maximum-security detention facilities for juvenile delinquents in Massachusetts, one staff member was very reluctant even to consider the program because "the kids will think it's stupid." Even so, he brought eight of his clients to a meeting room in the hope that as many as five would agree to meet with the five students who had arrived to begin the program. After explaining what the program included, the staff member asked for volunteers; to his surprise, all eight of the juveniles volunteered. In order to induce three of his charges not to participate, the staff member offered bribes of cigarettes. (Since that time cigarettes have been banned in juvenile detention facilities in Massachusetts.) When this did not work, he organized a lottery in which the winners would participate in the program and the losers "would have to wait until another group of students came to do the Discovery Program." Bear in mind that these were among the most intractable or most dangerous delinquents in the state: perpetrators of life-threatening assaults, sex offenders, gang members, multiple property offenders, armed robbers, and drug dealers.

Not only is the clients' initial reaction positive; so is their attitude throughout the program because the questions, which have been tested carefully over several years, are truly interesting to the participants. Rather than rejecting the questions or feeling awkward about conducting interviews based on these "canned questions," both students and clients feel comfortable with the general format; they look forward to the next question; questions are launching pads for tangential discussions, spontaneous reactions, jokes, and expressions of incredulity.

One student asked a juvenile a question in the book—about dreams he might have had—and was surprised to learn that indeed the juvenile had had a recurrent dream about living on an island where “the seasons are the opposite of here” and where “the devil comes up out of the ground” and “stabs with his pitchfork people who come out of luxury cruisers that dock at that island.” When asked to describe what he saw in his dream, the juvenile made elaborate drawings of the devil, the devil’s pitchfork, and the island. The juvenile who made these comments was a boy scarred badly by boiling water which one of his mother’s boyfriends had poured over him; a boy who was locked up in a detention center for shooting at the police, who had come to arrest him; a boy who also had been adjudicated for committing a series of burglaries.

Another student interviewed an inmate who had been a homeless person and an alcoholic; this inmate said he staged a robbery of a pharmacy because he wanted to go to jail during the cold winter months and “knew the old man who owned that pharmacy wouldn’t hurt me.” When the student asked this inmate if he knew anyone he would like to marry, the inmate told about a 20-year infatuation with a woman he had known only briefly when he was fifteen. Then the student, his curiosity piqued, asked these additional questions: “Do you think about her often?” Answer: “Yes, every day.” “Have you ever told anyone else about these feelings?” “No.” “Why?” “Because no one has ever asked.”

Sometimes information flows the other way, as when a student, after hearing about the death of an inmate’s father, told that inmate about her own father’s recent death. She said, “It’s made it hard for me to concentrate on my schoolwork, and I don’t know if I’ll do very well at all this semester or if I’ll graduate, but I hope things will work out for me.” The inmate replied, “Things’ll work out for you. He’ll help you work things out.”

Each meeting after the first begins where the last one ended. Both interviews and group meetings continue with the question or the chapter following the one that was discussed at the last meeting. When the allotted number of meetings has been held (depending on the transiency of the client population and the length of the semester, this might be from four to 10 meetings), a final meeting is held,

culminating during the last half-hour in a graduation ceremony. Here every participant says a few words about the program and gives a certificate of graduation to his or her partner. At the end there are a few minutes of informal conversation, during which refreshments (usually supplied by the students) are served.

All in all the meetings are relaxed, yet productive. Though there is often a lot of laughing and spontaneity, the questions provide structure, seriousness, and continuity. The questions are not a straitjacket but a crutch. Whenever students or clients feel awkward, they can always go back to the questions. A student might say, “Well, I guess we better get back to the questions” after a tangential line of conversation has run its course, or an inmate might say, “What’s the next question?” when spontaneous conversation lags or becomes threatening.

CONTENTS OF THE MEETINGS

By asking the questions printed in the two pamphlets, the student can obtain a wide-ranging, complex, detailed account of the experiences and attitudes of a group of clients. In the interview, questions are concerned with places where the client has lived and would like to live; schooling that the client has completed and additional schooling that is desired; jobs that the client has had and would like to obtain in the future; how much money the client spends, feels he or she needs to spend, and would like to spend; pastimes; use of drugs and alcohol; criminal history; family relationships; marriages, if any, as well as future hopes for marriage and family life; children; companions; memories; wishes; beliefs; and goals.

In the group meetings, the questions concern attitudes toward the same subjects that were discussed in personal, concrete terms during the interviews. Questions in the group meetings take two forms. First there are the general questions, such as “How does a person find a job?” or “What, besides money, would make you like a job?” Second, there are hypothetical questions that ask what the protagonist of a short story should do to solve a problem or which would be the best of several possible solutions to the problem described in the story. For example, these three questions follow a story about a junior high school-age boy unable to concentrate on

his schoolwork: 1) What should the boy do? 2) Which of the following solutions to this predicament do you think would be wise? (A list of possible solutions follows.) Why? 3) Have you ever known anybody in this kind of predicament? If so, describe the person and the situation and explain what happened. Among the potential therapeutic benefits of this line of questioning, it might help participants to adopt the kind of problem-solving strategy that is advocated by Janis and Mann (1977).

The pamphlets that guide the meetings contain enough questions to satisfy even the most taciturn and most anxiety-ridden students and clients that there will not be enough time to do the work that needs to be done. *The Discovery Book I*, for example, contains over 1000 questions. When students receive answers to even a few of the questions printed in the two pamphlets, they can glimpse hidden and subtle aspects of the clients' lives that perhaps no one else ever has discovered.

With the insights and information acquired in this way, the students are required to write a fairly sophisticated term paper in which they present a profile of their clients' lives, speculate about the causes of their clients' criminality (in part by referring to the criminological literature), and recommend appropriate treatments and/or punishments. To protect the confidentiality of their conversations, students are required to refer to their clients by first name only or by a pseudonym; also, papers are read only by the instructor, not by other students, faculty, or staff members of the supervising agencies.

An example of the kind of analysis that might appear in a student's term paper is this commentary about an inmate whom a student has chosen to identify as Tom: "Cloward and Ohlin (1960) hypothesized that the crime of lower class, urban males was due to lack of opportunity to succeed through legitimate means. Such an explanation does not seem to fit Tom. Though Tom's background was urban and lower class, he had one uncle who was a successful carpenter and another who was a successful restaurateur; both uncles had repeatedly offered to give him jobs and guidance. Also, during the time Tom was growing up, unemployment in his city was relatively low and opportunities for training and education were available. An explanation other than Cloward and Ohlin's is needed in Tom's case."

SELECTION OF CLIENTS

The clients who have participated in this program were selected in different ways and according to different criteria, depending on the agency involved. In some juvenile detention facilities housing as few as five or six juveniles, a staff member simply would match a college student with any juvenile who happened to be present, allowing only the most resistant of juveniles the option of being excused from this exercise. In other facilities, juveniles compete to take part in the program and must be selected by lottery or by some system of rewards or privileges. In the high-security juvenile facility described earlier in this paper, the staff's initial tendency to place the most cooperative juveniles in the program has been replaced by admitting what one staff member described as "the worst punks we have." Regardless of the selection criteria, no one is ever compelled or coerced into participating in the program.

At the jail, caseworkers recommend inmates who "need placement in a program." In general, according to several caseworkers, this means that a cross section of the inmate population tends to participate in the program, including armed robbers, drug dealers, sex offenders, career burglars, and perpetrators of vehicular homicide. All inmates are told that they are free to drop out of the program after the first meeting; in fact, they are told that dropping out would be preferable to disappointing a student by attending erratically or by refusing to talk. Inmates who complete the program are rewarded by the jail with a two-day "good-time" reduction of sentence, which most inmates seem to regard as a relatively insignificant incentive (most are given parole before their term is completed in any case).

Once embarked on the program, virtually no one chooses to drop out. In evaluation questionnaires that participants complete at the end of the program, over 95 percent of the inmates and over 92 percent of the juveniles stated that they would recommend the program to their peers. About 90 percent of each group also reported that the program made them think more about their lives and their future plans than they would have otherwise. Typical comments include "It was good to be able to talk to a normal person about things that have been on my mind" and "This helped me to think about my life. I enjoyed

it." Clients sometimes give notes, drawings, poems, or handcrafted items to the students who interview them. One 15-year-old boy wrote a note saying, "You guys, I just wanted to thank you for coming here to talk to us, and I'm sure all the other kids feel the same way." A 16-year-old girl made a poster on a long roll of paper with the word "Discovery" followed by the simple comment "Thanks." And two girls, one 14 and the other 16, created a rap song about how "we got so bad we had to tell our life stories to some college students and now we're better."

Altogether approximately 225 inmates and 275 juveniles have participated in the program since 1982.

SELECTION OF STUDENTS

College students become involved in the Discovery Program by registering for either of two courses offered by the criminal justice department at Westfield State College: "Case Study Seminar: Adult Offender" and "Case Study Seminar: Juvenile Offender." Because these are popular upper-division courses, all of the students are juniors or seniors and nearly all (about 90 percent) are criminal justice majors. The largest segment of students aspires to be police officers; a sizable minority want to be lawyers; a smaller minority aspire to work as probation officers, counselors, or social workers. Registration in the course is strictly first come, first served. Since 1982, approximately 300 students have participated.

Because currently the correctional facilities near the college want more students than the two seminar courses can supply, other possibilities for recruiting, supervising, and giving credit to students might evolve. These include interdisciplinary courses that would open participation to students from all disciplines; a volunteer program that would allow students to make their own arrangements with individual instructors for independent study credit; or making the Discovery Program the field or research component of a general criminology, criminal justice, or introductory sociology course. If the training and supervision of students are not relaxed, any of these arrangements could work satisfactorily.

TRAINING OF STUDENTS

Before meeting clients, students spend three

weeks learning about the various facilities hosting the program, the kinds of clients incarcerated in these facilities, and how the Discovery Program is organized. Students also review the Discovery materials and rehearse situations that they might encounter. Review and rehearsal are facilitated by a workbook (*The Discovery Workbook: A Guide for Organizers and Interviewers* 1987), which consists of questions that students must try to answer in the space allotted after each question. After answering the questions as well as they can, students then can compare their answers with the suggested answers given at the end of each chapter. By answering the questions in the workbook and by discussing some of these questions in class, students are made to feel quite comfortable about participating in the Discovery Program. Other factors also help make the experience fairly comfortable for the students: the program is simple in structure; the students bring questionnaire pamphlets to all meetings and can consult them at will; students are asked not to take notes during meetings; they go to meetings in groups; and finally, some of the students either have participated in the program before or know others who have participated.

One final aspect of the training is a list of five simple rules which are printed in contract form; students are asked to sign the contract, thus signifying their intention to abide by the rules. The rules include 1) attending every session; 2) not divulging the name or identity of a client; 3) not giving orders to clients and not passing judgment on them; 4) paying attention to what a client says (which means, among other things, not taking notes during meetings); 5) not divulging one's address or telephone number to a client and agreeing not to meet or correspond with a client after the program ends.

While the program is in operation, students meet as a group with their instructor once each week. At this time they have a chance to discuss general reactions to the program; they also have the opportunity to discuss problems or situations from the workbook.

STUDENTS' REACTIONS

Students invariably regard their participation in the program as worthwhile. From their stated and written comments, it is clear that their enthusiasm goes beyond whatever enter-

tainment value might be provided. Above all, the students seem to appreciate the authenticity of the experience. They have a chance to see or hear about at first hand what they had only read about in the past or had seen depicted on movies or television. Therefore the program enlarges their life experience, something that many of them value very highly. It also gives some of the students what they perceive to be invaluable assistance (in the form of both experience and contacts) in obtaining jobs in counseling, social work, law enforcement, and so on. Other students appreciate finding out that that they are not suited to those careers; thus they are freed to focus their attention on other kinds of careers.

For the reasons cited, all of the 300 students who have participated in the Discovery Program since its inception reported on a confidential questionnaire that they found the program personally rewarding and would recommend it to their fellow students. In keeping with this reaction, the courses for which participation in the Discovery Program is a requirement have been full, with waiting lists, semester after semester for five consecutive years.

On their evaluation questionnaires and term papers, students consistently offer comments like the following: "This was a unique experience that I will always remember." "This helped me decide what I want to do with my life." "This helped me realize that inmates are human beings, with problems like my own." This helped me to realize how fortunate I have been to have a family that cared for me." "For once, I felt like I was doing something worthwhile." "I learned a lot about the juvenile, but I also learned a lot about myself and my fellow students."

Particularly gratifying are instances in which participation in the Discovery Program led to an internship at the host facility, which led in turn to employment at the host facility. It is also gratifying that a number of former students employed at facilities housing juvenile delinquents have asked to host the Discovery Program. Many of the students who participated in the Discovery Program at the county jail realized as a result of that experience that employment related to their career interests was available to them at the jail; as a result, many became correctional officers and counselors and proved to be valuable employees.

CONCLUSION

During five years of experimentation by one instructor operating out of one academic department in one state college in western Massachusetts, the Discovery Program has proved to be a useful way of providing the concrete experience necessary to round out the teaching of criminology, juvenile delinquency, and deviance in the way suggested by Kolb and others. In those five years, the program has been approved almost unanimously by the staff of host agencies, by the college students, and by the adult and juvenile clientele.

Some readers might find it unbelievable that such a program would be so well received and so popular among incarcerated adults and juveniles, college students, and agency personnel, but what has been reported here is true. The skeptics must realize that students really crave concrete experience and a chance to do something that is regarded as useful by others, that incarcerated criminals really crave the company and attention of outsiders, that one can ask criminals questions that really interest them, and that college students really make extraordinarily effective role models for such people. As a result it is possible to design a program that dramatically enhances the education of undergraduates studying crime, delinquency, deviance, corrections, and related subjects.

REFERENCES

- Cloward, Richard A., and Lloyd E. Ohlin. 1960. *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*. New York: Free Press.
- Crew, Adolph. 1987. "A Rationale for Experiential Education." *Contemporary Education* 58:145-147.
- DeMartini, J. R. 1983. "Sociology, Applied Work and Experiential Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 16:17-31.
- The Discovery Book I*. 1987. Westfield, MA: Whistling Press.
- The Discovery Book II*. 1987. Westfield, MA: Whistling Press.
- The Discovery Workbook: A Guide for Organizers and Interviewers*. 1987. Westfield, MA: Whistling Press.
- Duley, John S., and Jane S. Permaul. 1984. "Participation in and Benefits from Experiential Education." *Educational Record* 65:18-23.
- Forster, Brenda, and Andrew K. Prinz. 1988. "Travel-Study As Learning in Sociology." *Teaching Sociology* 16:67-73.
- Glaser, B. G., and A. L. Strauss. 1969. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Free Press.
- Janis, Irving L., and L. A. Mann. 1977. *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment*. New York: Free Press.

- Kolb, David A. 1984. *Experiential Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Specht, P. H. 1985. "Experiential Learning-Based vs. Lecture Based Discussion: The Impact of Degree of Participation and Student Characteristics on Comprehension and Retention." *Journal of Business Education* 60:283-287.
- Sugarman, Leonie. 1985. "Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning: Touchstone for Trainers, Students, Counselors, and Clients." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 64:264-268.
- Takata, Susan R., and Wanda Leiting. 1987. "Learning by Doing: The Teaching of Sociological Research Methods." *Teaching Sociology* 15:144-150.

Norman Greenberg is Associate Professor in the Criminal Justice Department at Westfield State College. He has written and revised the Discovery Program materials and directs the Discovery Program. He has also written and self-published a research methods book, *Social Research Methods: A Practical Introduction*. He has published an article on the impact of the Discovery Program on criminals and delinquents. Address correspondence to Norman Greenberg, Criminal Justice Department, Westfield State College, Westfield, MA 01086.

For Faculty and Professionals with Authority to Recommend Journals for Their Library . . .

Would you like your library to subscribe to this journal? If you have the authority to recommend journals to your library, use the form below to order a complimentary sample copy for your librarian's review.

Yes, please send a sample copy of:

_____ (journal name)

I will submit the copy to our library for subscription consideration. The name of my institution and library are:

Name _____

Institution _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Return form to: Publications Department, American Sociological Association, 1722 N Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036