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Theoretical Underpinnings of Service Learning

ALTHOUGH THE MERITS OF SERVICE LEARNING frequently rest on how well it can be argued that the programs improve students' academic skills, this is only one of several outcomes that can result from implementing service learning programs. This article introduces readers to the full range of goals that service learning promises to achieve and to the specific principles that can be put into practice in order to meet these goals. Service learning consciously integrates students' experiences into the curriculum. As such it addresses the three major goals of "experiential education": allowing students to become more effective change agents, developing students' sense of belonging in the communities of which they are members, and developing student competence. The areas of competence addressed extend beyond the academic realm to include leadership, communication, and organizational skills.

The material presented in this article is based on a 6-year study of experiential education that combined academic and field research.[1] The fieldwork included participant and non-participant observations, formal and informal interviews, and document analysis. Sites included community-based organizations, schools, and independent educational organizations that sponsor activities in service learning, media production, health advocacy, performing arts, wilderness-based adventure, interpersonal skills, and leadership training.

Based on this research, I developed a conceptual framework that can be used to organize the planning, development, and evaluation of service learning and other experiential education programs. The framework is a resource for establishing, clarifying, or investigating the emerging vision of a service learning program. It can be used as a map for locating areas of focus for an evaluation. It provides language for discussing the relative merits of different service learning programs under different circumstances. It can be used to show how service learning can be combined with other educational offerings to enhance student development.

Experiential Education in Practice

How does one develop student agency, belonging, and competence? In looking at several examples of experiential education, including service learning, wilderness-based adventure programs, performing arts projects, and professional development activities, I found they had certain common characteristics despite differences in the activities or the characteristics of student populations. In each case, students were actively engaged in multiple forms of learning that had naturally occurring consequences of significance to students. Teachers drew on students' experiences and helped students to make connections between what they were learning and how they could use that knowledge in the

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future. Students were treated as valuable resources, not just recipients of what the organizations were trying to teach.

One of the community-based organizations in my study, Youth Health Advocates[2] (YHA), exemplifies experiential education in practice. By offering service learning programs, it empowers teenagers and young adults to: protect and improve their physical and mental health, increase their awareness of health issues, wage political battles to improve health care for youth, and reduce the isolation felt by young people who are HIV positive. A YHA staff member designed a program called the Female Youth Initiative (FYI) to improve the quality of health care, education, and resources that are available to female youth. A 5-month program with 15 participants, FYI had three components. Participants learned about health related issues, worked on personal challenges through a process of creative writing, and conducted an evaluation of health care facilities. These activities culminated in the production of a resource guide for other young women that provides information about health care issues and services. The guide, which has been professionally published, includes photographs, stories, and facts as well as reviews of health care agencies from the perspectives of a culturally diverse group of young women.

The FYI participants included inner-city gang members and suburban youth, teenaged parents and lesbians, and youth with varying amounts of schooling and with different linguistic backgrounds. They met on Tuesday nights to learn about anatomy, female and male physiology, the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, and other health care topics. On Saturdays, they met with a creative writing teacher to explore topics that ranged from body image and personal identity to relationships and sexual abuse. They also designed an evaluation form for recording their impressions of health care agencies and decided who would go to each agency posing as a client to assess the care that is provided.

The dual aim of the FYI project was to empower these young women—through education and opportunities for self-expression—to feel better about themselves and have more control over their own health and welfare while at the same time making a contribution to their community by offering information and education to a larger audience of young women. The integration of service and learning, combined with the manner in which participants were respected as valuable resources and empowered to take initiative in the process of becoming change agents in their communities, makes this project a strong example of how service learning programs implement the principles of experiential education. These principles, described in the following sections, are integral to the conceptual framework that can be used for planning and evaluation.

Foundations in Experiential Education Theory

Experiential education, of which service learning is a part, makes conscious application of students' experiences by integrating these experiences into the curriculum. Experience is comprised of sensory awareness (e.g., touch, smell, hearing, sight, taste), emotions (e.g., pleasure, excitement, anxiety, fear, hurt, empathy, attachment), physical conditions (e.g., temperature, strength, energy level), and cognition (e.g., constructing knowledge, establishing beliefs, and solving problems) (Carver, 1996).

In *Experience and Education,* Dewey maps out what he means by an "experience," and what it takes for an experience to carry educational value (Dewey, 1938). Dewey's first premise is that student experience results from the interaction between the student and the environment. This is known as the principle of interaction. Factors that affect student experience include those that are "internal" to the student and those that are "objective" parts of the environment. The students' perceptions of, and reactions to, the objective factors are influenced by their attitudes, beliefs, habits, prior knowledge, and emotions (see Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

The second and final premise of Dewey's theory is called the "principle of continuity." It states that "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 1938, pg. 35). Dewey believed that people develop habits of emotional response, perception, appreciation, sensitivity, and attitude. These habits, developed from past experiences, affect future experiences.

The educational value of an experience is derived from the way the experience contributes to

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the students' development (principle of continuity) as well as the immediate nature of students' relationships with their environment (principle of interaction). It takes into consideration not only the explicit curriculum but also the lessons people acquire by participating in activities. For instance, the FYI participants may have learned that they are good writers and that anatomy is interesting as well as learning specific rules of grammar or names of body parts. Dewey calls the learning that is not the result of an explicit lesson "collateral learning." Lessons acquired collaterally as well as formal curriculum are the substance of students' learning.

At Youth Health Advocates, the intuition of staff is consistent with Dewey's theory. The project director of the Female Youth Initiative invited youth to participate in a project that engaged them in their own health education and left them with both valuable knowledge and the satisfaction of having created a resource guide that will be useful to other members of their community. In these ways, she provided educational opportunities for youth by fostering learning experiences that were positive not only in their present forms but also because of what youth take away from them.

Dewey's contribution to the conceptual framework is in showing that student experience is at the center of education and that student experience is both a process (the process of interacting with a learning environment) and an outcome (what results from these interactions). To learn more about how teachers cultivate learning environments that promote educational experiences for students, we turn to Kurt Hahn, who founded schools and programs known for the powerful learning experiences that are reported by participants and staff. Hahn's legacy includes Outward Bound and the United World Colleges with its International Baccalaureate curriculum, both of which have schools throughout the world. Hahn's philosophy requires that educators attend to students both as individuals and as members of a community. Concerned that society was crumbling (James, 1980), he designed Outward Bound to "protect youth against a diseased civilization" in which there existed a lack of "care and skill," "enterprise and adventure," and "compassion" (Hahn, 1941).

Instructors of programs designed in the Hahn fashion often let students explore freely during the course of an activity; they then lead students through a follow-up activity known as "processing" the experience. Processing an experience involves creating an interpretation of what happened and reflecting on potential lessons at hand. This influences the nature and intensity of the experience's impact on students. Formal processing often takes place in groups, with instructors acting as facilitators. Using the Socratic method, an instructor can have a powerful influence on the development of group norms (see Lewin, 1952). The manner in which key concepts are defined by the group affects what its members learn (see Dweck, 1986; Lewin, 1952).

For instance, the way that the concept "health" was understood by staff and participants of the Female Youth Initiative played a big role in decisions about curriculum covered and the slant with which information was presented. The working understandings of key concepts were picked up by participants by way of collateral learning. They could also be addressed explicitly. In the FYI program, the creative writing sessions served as a place for guided reflection and the processing of experiences.

Although Hahn may never have used the expression "service learning," there is a service component to all of his flagship programs. When it came to public service, Hahn noted "the subtle line that distinguishes compassionate service from destructive egotism" and attempted to ensure that the former rather than the latter was employed in his programs (James, 1990, pg. 11).

Hahn's contribution to the framework comes in the form of insight into how staff shape the learning environments they share with their students. They support and facilitate student-directed learning. They model behaviors that are desirable for sustaining the environment (e.g., consistently treating people with respect). They are creative in their recognition and selection of resources. In the case of FYI, the young women in the program were treated as valuable resources (as opposed to being treated as people with problems that need to be fixed). Because the staff of FYI valued youth, creativity, critical thinking, and communication, these were the values shaping the learning environment.

Research in several areas of social science augment what Dewey and Hahn offer (see Warren, Sakofs, & Hunt, 1995, for examples). Dewey and

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Hahn's contributions hinge on the notion that teachers should provide students with positive experiences, which leads us to the question—what is a positive student experience? Some of the answers come from two separate streams of research. Milbrey McLaughlin and Shirley Brice Heath conducted research on community-based organizations that were successful at engaging and educating inner-city youth (see McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). They discovered that the most successful organizations addressed the needs of youth to develop autonomy, a sense of belonging, and competence (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). James Connell and James Wellborn (1991) studied how young people develop their self-concepts (i.e., their identities and self-esteem). They identified autonomy, relatedness, and competence as the three areas of psychological development that must be attended to in order for people to achieve psychological and social well-being.

The Female Youth Initiative allowed participants to learn about writing, health care, and conducting evaluations (areas of competence). It invited young women to become part of a group that could provide support for its members (a sense of belonging). It also attended to their need for autonomy, but when it came to experiential education, what was more to the point was the way participants combined autonomy and relatedness to become effective change agents and form networks of inter-dependency. In the framework, I use the terms *agency, belonging,* and *competence* to represent the salient aspects of what students experience. FYI participants became change agents in their communities by producing a book that increases the access young women have to information about health and health services. The initiative that FYI participants took is a sign of autonomy and an ingredient in exercising agency.

The Conceptual Framework

In the conceptual framework for experiential education (Figure 1), student experience, which is both a process and an outcome, sits at the heart of the learning environment. It is affected by characteristics of specific education programs and characteristics of the setting. "Student experience" refers to the experiences of official and unofficial "students." For instance, in the Female Youth Initiative, staff as well as participants developed competence (learning from youth, other instructors, and the practice of teaching). Staff became part of the group (belonging). They developed their own agency by working with youth to serve their communities and support youth development.

Student experience is defined by three interrelated facets that are in flux because student experience is a process as well as an outcome. These facets—agency, belonging, and competence—are described below. Collectively they form the essence of student experience, which I call ABC.

A represents the developing of students' personal agency—allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities, increasing students' recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity.

B refers to the development and maintenance of a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of belonging—in which they see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability, and learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole.

C stands for competence, referring to the development of student competence (which usually coincides with the development of teacher competence) in a variety of areas (e.g., cognitive, physical, musical, social). Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned.

The *processes* of developing student agency, belonging, and competence (ABC) include: facing challenges, choosing battles, conquering fears, building on strengths, overcoming weaknesses, participating in activities that allow for skill development and the development of knowledge about areas of interest to the student, developing social skills including active listening and asserting one's needs, building deeper understandings, performing tasks, making mistakes, struggling, reflecting on experiences, and being exposed to constructive feedback.

The *outcomes* of developing ABC include: increased self-knowledge, supportive relationships among peers, genuine respect and appreciation for self and others, greater proficiency at performing tasks, greater flexibility in the application of skills and knowledge, creative solutions to everyday problems, feelings of comfort and safety, greater productivity of group members, students becoming

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effective change agents, conflict resolution, pride felt by staff and students.

Creating and nurturing the development of a learning environment that promotes the development of ABC (in both student and staff experience) requires attending to both characteristics of the setting and characteristics of specific programs offered. Characteristics of the setting include resources, behaviors, and values.

- Resources include trust, empathy, language, tradition, reputation, energy, authority, and knowledge, as well as more commonly recognized resources such as money and physical materials.
- Behaviors include the identification, selection, distribution, and use of resources.
- Values that are shared by members of a learning community become guiding principles[4] for the behaviors listed above.

Not all behaviors and values promote the development of ABC. The core values of experiential education programs (which do promote ABC) include: caring and compassion; responsibility and accountability; individuality and diversity; critical thinking and creativity; and respect for self, other, and environment. These values are often articulated in the rhetoric of traditional academic institutions as well as experiential education programs. What sets experiential education programs apart from the others is the diligence with which staff members consistently act in accordance with their beliefs that these concepts are worth valuing. Students are given space to voice their opinions and are encouraged to question the practices of staff and evaluate their own experiences. Authority as well as responsibilities are shared. Respect is gained and used as the primary resource for staff to command the attention and enlist the support of students in performing tasks.

Four program characteristics stand out as salient features of education programs that seem to be most effective at promoting ABC. They are authenticity, active learning, drawing on student experience, and connecting lessons to the future.

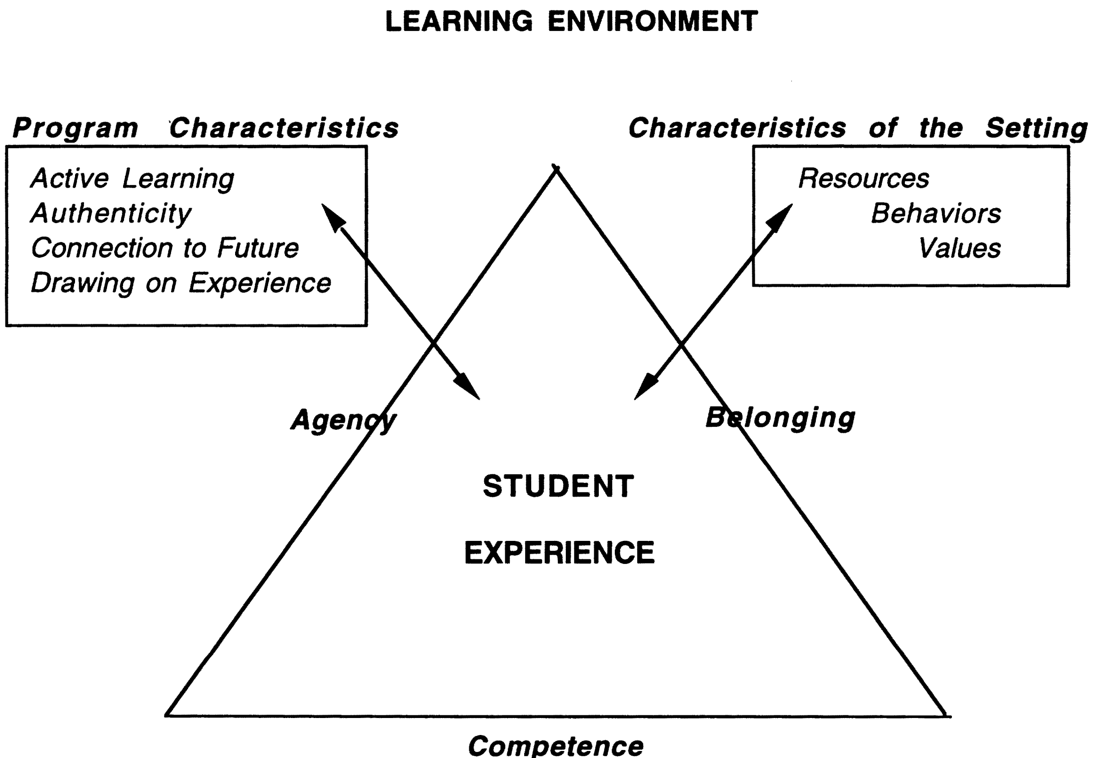

Figure 1. A conceptual framework for experiential education.[3]

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- Authenticity: Activities and consequences are understood by participants as relevant to their lives. Rewards are naturally occurring and directly affect the experience of the student (e.g., personal satisfaction). Students can identify reasons for participating in activities. Assessment is formative. The programs provide meaningful experiences within the context of the students' outlook on life.
- Multiple forms of active learning: Students are physically and/or mentally engaged in multiple forms of active learning. Physical activities may be used to address social, physical, and emotional as well as cognitive development. The difference between mentally active learning and passive learning is that the former requires students to internalize the thought processes necessary for problem solving—searching for explanations, figuring out ways of understanding, using their imagination and being creative—whereas the latter involves accepting what is said and remembering it, so that it can be repeated later.
- Drawing on student experience: Students are guided in the process of building understandings of phenomena, events, human nature, by thinking about what they have experienced (i.e., what happened to them, how they felt, how they reacted, what resulted, what they observed). Educators create activities that provide opportunities for students to experience what it is like to interact with specific situations. They draw on both experiences students bring with them to a program and those that are shared by participants in the context of the program.
- Providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity: Students develop habits, memories, skills, and knowledge that will be useful to them in the future. The formal process of getting students to reflect on their participation in activities or to reflect on their potential roles as community members is meant to make these experiences relevant to their future endeavors.

The Framework as a Tool

The framework can be used as a tool for organizing and communicating ideas about service learning. It is meant to be used as a map for charting the course of action taken by people who need to decide what they want to know about a service learning program and how they are going to acquire that knowledge. In other words, it can be used by program staff, evaluators (including students), and people making planning and policy decisions about service learning programs.

To answer the first question, "what do we want to know?" it could be helpful to make a list of items that are of interest and then see where they fit on the framework. Alternatively, one can choose conceptual clusters from the framework that are of interest and explore what they mean in the context of specific programs. I suggest an iterative process that goes back and forth between these two strategies.

For instance, academic skill development might be one program goal that is important to look at. This is an area of student competence. Thinking of it as such may remind people that there are other areas of competence that we might want to look at, and that the development of competence is interdependent with the development of agency and belonging. Further, the factors that affect the development of academic skills can be identified in terms of program and other environmental characteristics. Being as specific as possible about what is meant by expressions such as "academic skills" will make it easier to identify specific outcomes that fall under each goal and indicators of achieving these outcomes.

Being specific about what one wants to study is the first step in a process of determining how to study it. That does not mean, however, that it is necessary to begin with a list of outcomes that constrain the process of student directed learning. One strategy for managing the task of identifying outcomes without jeopardizing the integrity of experiential education programs (in which individual students help determine the outcomes for themselves) is to identify outcomes in terms of development along various dimensions. For instance, a desirable outcome would be the development of competence. More specifically, a set of desirable outcomes could be identified in terms of the development of academic skills in particular areas (e.g., biology, English, or critical thinking).

Each topic chosen for study (or evaluation) can be thought of as a dimension along which change can take place. Student experience is a dimension. Community involvement is a dimension. Program legitimacy is another. For each dimension, one can ask the following questions: Why is it being selected? What are the implications of achieving success along this dimension? What would success look like? What factors either foster development along this dimension or present constraints? The question, "What would success look like?" leads to the identification of measures and indicators that

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in turn can be used for the development of evaluation tools such as data collection instruments.

Indicators are merely ways of indicating success; they are not outcomes in and of themselves. For instance, an outcome may be "students gain knowledge of human biology." One indicator of achieving this outcome would be an improvement in the results of paper and pencil tests that ask students questions about human biology. Another indicator would be questions asked by students, in the course of a discussion, that are based on assumptions that reflect an understanding of the material previously covered. There may be several objectives that fall under a specific category of outcomes, and several ways in which achieving these objectives can be indicated.

Involving staff in the process of generating lists of indicators for success along a given dimension can be a form of professional development. Staff members might take part in exercises that challenge them to reach consensus on what they mean by certain goals (e.g., to value critical thinking, to assess whether students develop a sense of belonging, to use resources responsibly). Exercises in student reflection can contribute to student learning and at the same time produce valuable data for a review of a program. The assessment of service learning programs can be integrated into the everyday practice of program staff and participants. The conceptual framework presented in this article can be used to make such assessment efforts valuable in terms of both process and outcomes.

Conclusion

As those who work with service learning programs are aware, the benefits of service learning include but also go beyond academic learning. As a form of experiential education, service learning develops student' abilities as change agents, gives them a sense of belonging, and fosters the development of competence. The conceptual framework presented in this article can be used to see beneath anecdotal evidence of program success and describe the strengths and weaknesses of service learning programs. It can be used to show how and why service learning programs can be valuable in the lives of students and why some programs are more beneficial than others for particular students at particular stages in their lives.

Notes

1. Dissertation research as partial fulfillment of a degree from the School of Education at Stanford University. Dissertation title: "Education for All—From Experience, Through Guidance and Reflection."
2. "Youth Health Advocates" and "Female Youth Initiative" are pseudonyms.
3. An earlier version of this framework appeared in *The Journal of Experiential Education* (Carver, 1996).
4. I borrow the expression "guiding principles" from my colleague Joanne Lieberman (1997).

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