

SEER 2006 Opening Address

The Three Rs for Experiential Education Researchers

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“All genuine education comes through experience.”

—John Dewey

Most of us doing research in areas related to experiential education are familiar with the words of John Dewey and believe that his philosophy offers a sound theoretical underpinning for our field. It has been almost 70 years since Dewey wrote these words, and during this time our research efforts have evolved as we have tried to better understand the meaning and power of experiences to human development and learning. The purpose of this presentation is to suggest that for those of us interested in experiential education research, there are three Rs important for us to consider related to our work:

Relevance

Relationships

Real (authentic)

Each of these three aspects are briefly described and framed around challenges facing today's researchers.

Relevance

We seem to be undergoing radical cultural, environmental, and technical changes that make our world increasingly volatile. Every day we are confronted with crises around global warming, deforestation, drought, potential pandemics, natural disasters, poverty, genocide, and war. We seem to confront naysayers at every turn and find science has become politicized to serve whatever whim needs to be met. The challenge seems to revolve around the need to make information personal and meaningful to individuals as they struggle with their day-to-day lives. If we look again to Dewey, his ideas that genuine learning must involve the individual in

a social learning context, be carried out in a range of learning environments, and be of perceived *relevance* to the learner seem to have nuggets of hope for ways to help people deal with these challenges.

So what does this need for relevance mean to us in our research efforts? I think three messages can be found around relevance and our research:

- Our research needs to continue to be meaningful to professionals in other fields so we do not risk talking only to ourselves.
- We need to provide research that meets the needs of our practitioners so the link between research and practice is enhanced with practitioners recognizing the value of the findings and researchers understanding the information needed by practitioners to meet the challenges they face daily.
- Our research needs to be shared in multiple ways across varied audiences to help demonstrate the relevance of experiential education and the value it has to offer in many settings with diverse clientele.

Relationships

The second R is for relationships. In *The World is Flat*, Friedman (2005) makes the case for the importance of establishing all sorts of relationships if we are to flourish in a global society. I think for those of us interested in experiential education research, we have a solid base from which to point to our documented successes in providing supportive environments in which relationships are promoted and valued as integral to human development.

Our research efforts will need to continue to demonstrate value in two areas:

- Internal relationships where we know that we make a difference in the supports and opportunities around building relationships with our clientele in ways that other groups (schools, youth organizations, etc.) can't do through their traditional structures.
- External relationships through which we collaborate in our research efforts, which are often interdisciplinary, and share our findings broadly with colleagues in related areas.

Real (authentic)

The last R is for being real or offering ways to our participants to be authentic. Many of our participants seek opportunities where they can be themselves (or find out things about themselves) and be engaged in meaningful activities. In our current world, where virtual has the potential to encroach on reality, people want experiences where they can be authentic and make a difference. These opportunities may be to engage with the environment, a particular group of people, or may be with the community through activities like service-learning.

So what are the implications for our research in experiential education related to being real?

- Our research efforts need to continue to document the meaning behind experiences and the outcomes that can be attributed to these experiential opportunities for growth and development.
- We must continue to move beyond measuring satisfaction and look more critically at our efforts to better understand behaviors, attitudes, and values that occur through our experiences.

Many challenges face our field. I believe research is one tool we can use to tell our story in a way that highlights our *relevance* as we work to build positive *relationships* and offer opportunities for *real* self-discovery through experiential education. We need to build our research repertoire with longitudinal studies, more mixed methods, demographic analyses that reflect our changing society, studies to address technology issues, and projects that help articulate values important to our programs. I believe we have an obligation to produce knowledge and promote the acquisition of learning in ways that can find solutions to today's ills and challenges. We must step up and help create a path to the future that is built on solid empirical information. We need to clearly articulate through our research the values, traditions, and contributions provided by experiential education. Our job as researchers is to set the course and take action to create the knowledge needed by the field. As said by von Goethe: "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do."

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References

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- Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.