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The Transformative Potential of Learning Through Service While “Doing” Classroom-Based Research

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The Transformative Potential of Learning Through Service While “Doing” Classroom-Based Research

Abstract

Experiential education and service-learning are “buzz words” within many educational circles. The purpose of this study was to explore students’ (N=18) and professor experiences with/in a student-directed experiential education elective course, with a particular focus on a service-learning initiative. Stephen Brookfield’s critical incident questionnaire (1995) and transformative phenomenology served as the guiding frameworks for this study. The results yielded four themes, including: 1) Sense of accomplishment, 2) Feelings of frustration, 3) Questioning student-directed course experience, and 4) Experiences from self-study participation. This study serves to further confirm that engaging in service-learning projects within a student-directed course can lead to a strong sense of accomplishment despite feelings of frustration and resistance.

L'apprentissage par l'expérience et l'apprentissage par le service sont des expressions au goût du jour dans de nombreux milieux éducatifs. L'objectif de cette étude était d'explorer les expériences des professeurs et des étudiants dans un cours facultatif axé sur l'apprentissage par l'expérience dirigé par les étudiants, dont l'accent portait sur les initiatives d'apprentissage par le service. Le questionnaire de Stephen Brookfield sur les incidents critiques (1995) ainsi que la phénoménologie transformatrice ont servi de cadres conceptuels pour cette étude. Les résultats ont mené aux quatre thèmes suivants : 1) sens d'accomplissement, 2) sens de frustration, 3) questionnement sur l'expérience d'un cours dirigé par les étudiants, et 4) expérience dérivée de la participation à l'auto-formation. Cette étude confirme de nouveau que le fait de s'engager dans des projets d'auto-formation dans un cours dirigé par les étudiants peut aboutir à un sens profond d'accomplissement, malgré certains sentiments de frustration et de résistance.

Some years ago, during the middle of the semester, one of the more perceptive students in a course that I teach on experiential education queried, “If the potential for learning in a student-directed classroom is so important, why are we now learning theory only, and not actually experiencing a student-directed classroom firsthand?” The fourth-year, undergraduate “Experiential Education” course that I have taught for over a decade problematizes commonly-held assumptions in education and encourages the development of critical classroom practices. That said, the structure of the course has historically been taught with a predominantly “traditional” format. We have typically met for three hours a week, discussed the day’s readings, engaged in an occasional experiential activity, and, in more recent years, co-negotiated assessment rubrics. This past year, we also engaged in a service-learning project that was supported by a service-learning incentive grant awarded by my university. The student who identified the disconnect between the theory *of* the course and her experience *in* the course triggered my own long-standing concern about the gap between *what* I teach and *how* I teach.

Purpose

In light of this incident and my ongoing self-reflection about the potential for this course, I tried an alternative configuration this Winter semester (2012). The students and I engaged in a self-study designed to challenge the belief held by many feminist/critical theorists, including, for example, bell hooks and Elizabeth Ellsworth, who query whether dialogue, safe space, and freedom are merely repressive myths within university classrooms. The purpose of the study was to explore students’ and professor experiences with/in a student-directed experiential education elective course, with a service-learning project as one component of that course. What successes and challenges do students and the professor experience and how? What surprises, new learnings and pedagogical risks ensue? What is service-learning and who is served? The focus of this paper is to present findings from our experiences with the course generally with a particular focus on our experiences with the service-learning project, which involved designing and building an outdoor classroom at a local Montessori school.

Literature Review

This literature review will provide definitions for experiential education and service-learning and provide an overview of the theoretical framework that guided this study.

Experiential Education

Experiential education and service-learning are “buzz words” within many educational circles. The Association for Experiential Education (2012) defines experiential education as a philosophy, that informs many methodologies, in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people’s capacity to contribute to their communities. The terms experiential learning and experiential education are often used interchangeably but there exists an important distinction (Breunig; 2008a; Itin; 1999). David Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle (see figure 1 below) provides a helpful illustration for understanding experiential learning as methodology. The cycle consists of four distinct segments: (a) concrete experience, (b)

observation and reflection, (c) forming new knowledge, and (d) application and testing concepts in new situations. The experiential learning cycle in Figure 1 helps to illustrate this:

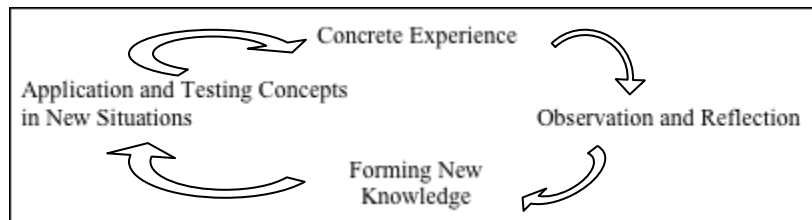


Figure 1. The experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

The aspects of experience, reflection, new knowledge, and application can be employed as a way of teaching (i.e. methodology). Many experiential educational initiatives are based on this learning cycle but do not prescribe an intended learning outcome or aim. For example, a person wishing to learn a new skill, gardening, for example, might purchase some seeds and till the soil and plant the seeds with/in the hope of growing vegetables. She would water the soil as needed and watch for signs of growth, wondering throughout about which conditions might nurture growth. She might read a bit about the growing season and soil quality as the process progresses and may revise her approach to gardening the subsequent season, in light of the first year results and her experiences. This represents experiential learning as methodology—an approach to teaching and learning that is not philosophically oriented per se.

In essence, employing the experiential learning cycle without an intended educational aim represents a methodology, implying that there is a certain way of teaching and learning that makes the learning experiential. Experiential education as philosophy employs both methodology (experiential way of teaching) and philosophy as part of the educative process. Experiential education as philosophy implies that there is an intended aim toward which the experiential learning process is directed and this philosophical/teleological orientation holds social and environmental transformative potential (Breunig, 2008a; Warren, 2002).

Service-Learning

According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2012), service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Service-learning resembles other forms of community-based learning approaches, including field trips, internships, and volunteerism, for example; what distinguishes it is its emphasis on both community service and academic learning (Furco, 2010). Another distinguishing factor is its intention to benefit both the provider and recipient of the service, often referred to as reciprocity. Reciprocal service-learning initiatives work towards ensuring that all parties involved in the service-learning experience receive benefits (Crabtree, 2008; Porter & Monard, 2001).

Service-learning is one of the fastest growing educational initiatives in contemporary primary, secondary and post-secondary education (Furco, 2010). Service-learning praxis (Freire, 1970) (incorporating theory, practical action, and reflection) explores a broad range of societal issues, including those concerning the environment, health, public safety, and human needs (Tapia, 2008). Academic service-learning seeks to enhance students' academic achievement and their civic development and is connected to school-based curricular initiatives (Eyler and Giles,

1999; Tapia, 2007). Academic service-learning provides students with contextualized learning experiences that are based on “authentic real-time situations in their communities” (Furco, 2010, p. 228). The primary goal is to enhance students’ understanding of the broader value and utility of academic lessons with the traditional disciplines of science, mathematics, and fine arts, for example, while contributing to real community needs (Furco). Furco (2010) describes this form of teaching and learning as an experiential learning pedagogy.

Results from several previous academic classroom-based studies provides evidence of students’ increased capacity to critique their world while imagining how they could contribute to a more socially just world, describing their experiential and service-learning experiences as transformational (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Kreber, 2013, Mitchell, 2010). Kiely (2004) defines transformation as “the process of re-evaluating identity, lifestyle choices, daily habits, relationships and career choices” (p. 13). Cipolle (2010) contends that as students develop a more complex view of the world through experiential and service-learning activities that are purposeful, real, connected to academic theory, and include ample opportunities for structured reflection, they move from a framework where they understand the need for service in terms of individual deficits to “an institutional, systemic view of the causes of injustice and inequity” (p. 11). That complex view is one with a social justice orientation and focuses on both personal and “systems” transformation.

John Dewey’s pragmatism and Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy provide two foundational educational philosophies that ground this study and connect with the transformative and social justice orientations of both experiential education and service-learning pedagogies. According to Deans (1999), Dewey “is such a compelling figure because his pragmatic philosophy ties knowledge to experience, his progressive political vision connects individuals to society, and his student-centered educational theory combines reflection with action” (p. 15). Stanley Aronowitz (1993) describes Brazilian liberatory pedagogue, Paulo Freire as “the Latin John Dewey” (p. 10). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) emphasizes the need to critique oppressive structures and encourages the development of a conscientization (i.e. critical consciousness) that proffers people with the knowledge(s) and resources for them to work toward liberatory action.

While there are many definitions and approaches to “doing” experiential education pedagogy and service-learning each reflecting particular contexts and ideological predispositions, I favour one that aligns with Dewey and Freire’s focus on social transformation, critical thinking, and the development of conscientization.

Methods

This next section will provide an overview of the methodology, study sites and participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

Methodology

Choices about methodology depend upon the questions being asked and also on one’s ontological and epistemological leanings (Creswell, 2012; Schram, 2003). I believe that realities are co-constructed through our lived experiences and that research shapes and reshapes the lives and experiences of students and researchers. Given the study’s purpose, theoretical framework, and my own pedagogic disposition, I chose transformative phenomenology as the methodological framework. Phenomenological inquiry focuses on lived experience as a source of

knowledge and a rejection of the received knowledge of a single authority (Husserl 1913/1931; Moustakas, 1994). Transformative phenomenology aims to “help the scholar-practitioner bring phenomenology to practice” (Rehorick & Malhotra Bentz, 2008, pp. 6-7) and acknowledges that studying a phenomenon holds inherent transformative potential. Transformative phenomenology thus resonates with the purpose of this present study and the community-based project.

Study Sites and Participants

The two “sites” for this study consisted of a fourth year, 12-week (semester long) experiential education elective course at a mid-sized Canadian University and a local Montessori school, which served as the site for the service project. This student-directed course met “formally” for three hours each week and the course began with an initial summary description, enumerating the following:

This student-directed course includes a high degree of curriculum negotiation. The course adopts a semi-structured approach to this process with the professor establishing some initial structure and course content for the first 1/3 of the course and with you, as students, co-establishing course assessments, expectations, and content for the rest of our time together. We will also be discussing the class meeting time and space and negotiating that as well (Recreation and Leisure Studies 4Q96 course syllabus).

The course description goes on to say,

A service-learning incentive grant in the amount of \$1000 was procured in support of purposefully acting upon the philosophy of experiential education with its focus on students serving as agents of social and environmental change in the world. We will have to decide how to spend this based on our assessment of community needs and the ways in which our knowledges, skills and dispositions may best serve our community (Recreation and Leisure Studies 4Q96 course syllabus).

Throughout the first 1/3 of the semester, students spent considerable time, both in and out of the classroom, researching and discussing how best to use the service-learning incentive grant to meet a “real” community need. After much deliberation, the students decided to construct an outdoor classroom. Having previously visited a local Montessori school (serving students pre-K-grade 4) to learn about how this form of pedagogy exemplifies experiential education in action, the students decided on building the classroom at that school. With the assistance of a local landscaper with connections to our university, the students designed and constructed an outdoor classroom space with seating for 20 students and a small podium for the teacher to instruct from. We planted native trees and grasses to enhance the space.

There were 19 students in the class—18 of those participated in the study, 11 female students and 7 male students (20-25 years old). One student opted not to participate in light of other commitments. Congruent with transformative phenomenology with its focus on reports of student/participants’ life experiences alongside reports of the researcher’s lived experiences (Rehorick & Malhotra Bentz, 2008), I too served as a participant in this study. The research project underwent university Research Ethics Board (REB) review.

Data Collection

Congruent with phenomenological “best practices” which identifies that people’s reports about their lived experience can be expressed in many ways (VanManen, 1990), I employed both journals and focus group sessions to collect data. According to Chabon and Lee-Wilkerson (2006), a journal is both a diary and a log in that it blends personal reflections, accounts of events and descriptions of experiences. Journaling is a useful tool to document specific experiences in natural contexts and feelings associated with those experiences (Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012; Smith & Hunt, 1997). In light of the methodology and my own “critical” pedagogical praxis, I adopted Stephen Brookfield’s “Critical Incident Questionnaire” to formulate the journal script (Brookfield, 1995). This framework has been employed in several studies (Glowacki-Dudka & Barnett, 2007; Phalen, 2012) and seeks to capture the “vivid happenings” that occur in a learning episode (Keefer, 2009). Students (and I) responded to the questionnaire items and were prompted to capture thoughts and new learnings related to each week’s class experiences, all within 24 hours post-class. The journals were used solely for this purpose and there was no assessment attached to it.

Because meanings and answers arising from focus group interviews are socially rather than individually constructed (Berg, 2011), the focus group session from this study was designed with the intent to provide students (and myself) with a forum to collectively reflect upon and articulate our lived experiences with the student-directed course. The focus group session occurred two weeks after the end of the semester. Of the 18 study participants, 13 were able to attend the focus group session at the scheduled time, four males and nine females. The session lasted 1.5 hours and was audiotaped. Students self-assigned pseudonyms. The focus group session was semi-structured allowing room for general sharing and for concerns to arise while also consisting of pre-established questions about course experiences, successes, and challenges. Students were also asked to answer the question, “What constitutes course content?” and to reflect upon “surprises,” “new learnings” and “applications.” Given the semi-structured and collective/reflective foci of this focus group session, I believe that the resultant responses were particularly generative and sapient (Morgan, 2001).

Data Analysis

The focus group session was transcribed and journal entries and focus group reports were analyzed inductively. An analysis of phenomenological data adopts an inductive and emergent strategy with a focus on understanding the meaning of participant descriptions (vanManen, 1990). I thus read through the transcriptions in the spirit that Berg (2011) suggests – “as a passport to listening to the words of the text and understanding better the perspective(s) of the producer of these words” (p. 269), congruent with inductive analysis. Through this inductive process, I identified “significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 82).

According to Creswell, the researcher next develops clusters of meaning, grouping significant statements into themes. The same is done with the participant/researchers’ statements. This inductive approach to analysis and gathering data from multiple sources is congruent with the intent of both bridging the scholar-practitioner gap and using theory to inform practice, inherent in transformative phenomenology (Rehorick & Malhotra Bentz, 2008). Employing

multiple data sources and constantly comparing reports from those data sources and various participant voices adds reliability and validity to the study results (Patton, 2002).

Results

The results yielded four themes that were related to the service-learning project and aspects of students' (and my) participation in the student-directed classroom experience, including: 1) Sense of accomplishment, 2) Feelings of frustration, 3) Questioning student-directed course experiences, and 4) Experiences from self-study participation. Select quotes and paraphrases from student journal and focus group reports are presented here to highlight each of these themes. My own select journal and focus group comments are integrated with those student reports.

Sense of Accomplishment

All of the students (as did I) reported feeling a strong sense of accomplishment about completing the service-learning project. Gloria said, "Did you see how excited the teachers, kids, and parents were" [post project]? Jeff responded, "Yeah, one of the teachers said that she had never seen the principal so jazzed." Wayne wrote, "I was very surprised at how everything actually came together in the end. How fantastic it [the outdoor classroom] looked and how much work we did in such a short time." One student, Lisa commented in her journal, "My impression is that the kids will benefit from this and that [this success] may push other schools in the community to do something similar." Grant reported, "We actually got to do the service-learning and discuss what WE wanted, bringing out some really neat group dynamics." Martha stated, "The service-learning project was the best part of this class," describing it as "the most successful aspect."

Over 1/2 of the students also shared reports about feeling a sense of accomplishment as a result of their experiences with the course generally. Grant talked about the class, saying [in the focus group session], "This class is educative – the actual experiencing of the education itself." Donatello shared, "I learned a lot about accountability in this class." Margot said that, "I've learned something about myself. It is interesting to look back through the experiential learning cycle, knowing what I know now, based on two or three years ago....like living the cycle over the course of these four years." She added, "the course and experiential activities were really cool and beneficial."

Several students expressed feeling a sense of surprise with all they accomplished. Heather wrote, "I found it surprising that we went from having few concrete service-learning plans to really having an idea of what we were doing." Others affirmed that the process was lengthy but rewarding as well as personally challenging. Grant said,

I stepped up and tried to [facilitate a conversation about the service-learning initiative], and tried to be a leader and then not be hurt by the experience. I wanted to get things done but I didn't, I wasn't really thinking about everyone else and [in the end] the learning became a positive experience by taking the negatives and turning them into positives.

“Whenever we were in small groups or one or two of us took the lead and the others followed, we were successful,” according to Hannah.

Feelings of Frustration

Every student expressed feelings of frustration, both with planning for the service-learning project and with the non-traditional class structure, as did I. Many students reported about how time-consuming it was to come to consensus about the service-learning project. Heather reported, “I felt like it was such a waste of time when as a class we were searching the regional website for areas with a need we can serve.” Kate wrote, “I was surprised that the class doesn’t seem to care or understand that time is of the essence and that by the time we choose an activity, the course will be done.” A number of students noted, “we waste so much time without accomplishing anything.” Alicia reported, “If I hear one more word about service-learning without making a final, solidified decision, I’m going toSCREAM!” Margot said,

I think the most challenging [aspect] was some of our unproductiveness. I thought when we were doing the service-learning project and [someone would] throw around an idea and people had their concept and we went full circle and stuff, and I think people weren’t listening. But it was also all a part of the learning experience.

Skip wrote in his journal, referring to the start of the outdoor classroom construction day,

The landscaper gave so many directions and we were such a big group that it was overwhelming but after awhile, his motivation towards us students later in the day, was affirming as was a group of 20 students coming together to accomplish one goal that came together in the end.

In talking about how the service-learning money was spent, Kris stated, “I think it is stupid, just plain stupid to give our service-learning time money and effort to a school who already has all of those things. Come on people, its like giving riches to the rich. DUH !”

A number of students shared reports about frustrations with the course generally. Zelda stated that,

In other classes it’s easier to stall, and deal with stress, whereas in this class it kind of just got worse and worse and worse...like pouring salt into an open wound and when we tried to solve something, it became increasingly difficult.

“There was more feeling attached to this class given that it was student-directed and we centrally invested far more of our own energy and our own emotions into it,” according to Johnny. “It [this course] brings out our vulnerability moreso than other [classes],” according to Donatello. Johnny added to that saying, “our vulnerability came from our ideas and putting forth ideas [in front of peers],” later saying “there needs to be some way to balance business and pleasure. Because at times, it was never really clear if we should treat each other and you as peers or as students.” Lisa wrote in her journal, “I get the feeling that there are some cliques within the class that can make it difficult to work cohesively as a group.”

Questioning Student-Directed Course Experience

About 1/2 of the students reported being enthusiastic about and challenged by being a member of this student-directed course and many questioned it. Several students talked about my role as the professor and how my being more (or less) present and actively involved impacted them. On a day when I was absent from class, June wrote,

What surprised me the most was the fact we got things accomplished even without the professor there to guide, direct, or even teach us. So maybe this teaches us that we don't always need supervision or someone there to lecture us to actually learn something.

Drew recalled, “[professor’s name], while you pushed us to succeed ourselves, we’d be kidding ourselves if we thought we’d be anywhere close to this point [of project completion] without you.” Mary Beth said, “I found the days when there was no teacher present that the class was in shambles. It made me feel uneasy.” Donatello notes, “When the power shifted from the instructor giving the lecture to the students taking over with the discussion of the [service-learning] project, there was noticeable shift in energy.” She went on to write, “The fact that we were able to create something so meaningful, motivated and inspired me to be passionate about what we were learning.” Heather expressed confusion over what she described as the push/pull authority of the professor. “Sometimes [professor’s name] was too involved at the wrong time and other times she was involved too little.”

About 1/2 of the students commented on their role as members of this student-directed classroom experience. Heather commented that she found it “puzzling that people don’t show up to this class” (and I wrote this in my journal as well). Donatello commented in the focus group session that she “was surprised by how much work we self-assigned. I’m still kind of puzzled by that, “like why didn’t we think the service-learning project should have marks attached?” asking the others in the focus group session. Mary Beth shared, “I think we set very high expectations for ourselves and that made it a tad overwhelming.” Drew wrote, “without grades attached to the service-project, people didn’t commit the time they maybe would have if they were being graded.” Donatello noted in her journal that many of the students in the class like the sound of their voice and express every opinion they have, which is “tedious and irritating.” She went on to write, “The course often gives me a bit of whiplash in the structure. We often go from full liberation to a complete lack of student involvement.”

Students and I talked about other aspects of our experiences as members of the student-directed classroom as well. Margot said that she found the class empowering, calling the approach “open minded” and adding, “I thought the timing of this course, just before I was about to graduate, was perfectly placed.” Zelda found the class too big to attempt student-directed decision-making and “true consensus” when it came to choices about the service-learning initiative. Ed added to her comments in the focus group session, saying “I will think very carefully before making a democratic decision [as a teacher myself] because of how long they take.” I reported that hearing about people’s experiences, was making me self-reflexive about “playing around with structure/lack of structure in the future,” explaining how hard student-centred pedagogy was “not knowing [in advance] who’s going to come into the room and what the dynamics are going to be.” One comment I made with more certainty was, “I am going to look into getting more grant support to do outdoor classrooms/schoolyard greening initiatives

across the Niagara region based on our [positive] experiences with the service project and the potential positive outcomes for the school and community.”

Experiences with Self-Study Participation

Two thirds of the students reported that participating in the study and engaging in structured reflection was impactful. Hannah said, “I am doing my honour’s thesis on the impact journaling has on students’ perceptions of field experiences,” making this week’s readings and the study especially relevant.” Margot commented that content for the course was different, “what we took out of the course and study and what we learned [was focused on] taking responsibility for ourselves.” Janice commented, “The content consisted of collaborating, reflecting on the assignments and the readings, doing the service-learning project and the self-study, making the [course] content more meaningful.”

Students reported about positive and negative experiences with reflective journaling as a component of the study and course. According to Mac, “the biggest success for me came from journaling after classes and reflecting came in the form of personal growth or self-awareness” and Grant added to this in the focus group session, saying, “I too found journaling very valuable for myself. Just learning and writing down all my ideas and all the emotions that I felt during the day.” Mac concluded, “I’ll keep the journal to direct me after the experience.”

Conversely, Baker started his journal with the following, “Journaling...again?,” making reference to the number of courses that include journals as a required course component. Another student wrote, “I am meeting with [professor’s name] to drop out of the study given I am behind in journaling” and my own journal read, “I am falling behind with journaling and need to be more vigilant.” On the last page of Derek’s journal, I read, “To take this road of peace, we must return to our land. Go, find a spot and let your mind wander...eyes closed. What do you hear? Feel? Smell? Taste? Try to recall those feelings through the day,” writing this as his own self-prompt.

Scholarly Significance

In keeping with transformative phenomenology, I focus here on how the results inform and transform practice (Rehorick & Malhotra Bentz, 2008), exploring three primary categories stemming from these results: 1) the service-learning initiative, 2) use of journals and structured reflection, and 3) participation in a student-directed class. This study confirms that student-directed instruction involving experiential activities and problems requiring critical thinking—in this case, puzzling out how to identify and participate in a service-learning initiative—can lead to a strong sense of accomplishment, a deeper understanding of course material, and holds transformative potential (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Kiely, 2004; Kreber, 2013, Mitchell, 2010).

Service-Learning Initiative

Resonant with other previous study results, the community service project and participation in the student-directed course and the study itself enhanced students’ understanding of the importance of relationships and compelled them to examine personal accountability (Furco, 2010; Kreber, 2013). Students reported feelings of accomplishment upon completion of the service project and talked about how they gained an enhanced understanding of both self and

certain classmates based on their experiences of constructing the outdoor classroom, identifying examples of new learnings as a result of participation in the project and the course. Interestingly in my study, particularly when compared to other relevant studies (Cipolle, 2010; Furco, 2010), the results provide little evidence of students feeling stronger connections to the community. Gloria's comment, "Did you see how excited the teachers, kids, and parents were?" was one of only three comments related to any impact at all on anyone outside of our classroom. Results from my study also lack reports about civic engagement and/or issues of social justice. Evidence of these new learnings is well-documented in many previous research studies (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Kreber, 2013, Mitchell, 2010) which has me wondering about our service-learning project and how I framed and frontloaded it.

Experiential Educator, Jay Roberts (2008) cautions educators to avoid becoming neo-experientialists offering little more than an experience. Neo-experiential learning activities, in essence, are superficial, consumptive and uncritical experiences that are offered in neatly structured packages that often deny learners the opportunity for creation, participation and in-depth reflection (Roberts). While I do not believe that the service-learning initiative for this course serves as an example of the type of neo-experiential activity that Roberts refers to here, I am reflexive about his cautions and advice. I wonder how I might approach introducing this service-learning experience in the future, particularly in light of some of the study results and Roberts' cautions and how I might theoretically ground the experience more thoroughly, introducing community service learning as a form of social and civic practice. Kreber (2013) suggests that productive hands-on activities rather than purely theoretical pursuits not only help students learn and translate that learning into action but proffers them with what she refers to as a social practice, grounded in MacIntyre's (2008) approach to moral philosophy. In my case, there was a productive hands-on activity that may have been inadequately grounded. A social practice is an activity that is situated within a community and has distinct values and qualities, with a focus on productive, educative purpose (Dewey, 1938; Kreber, 2013), and it is these experiences and activities that engender "deep" learning unlike the neo-experiential activities that Roberts encourages us to avoid. I believe that placing more emphasis on the service-learning project, allowing additional time, further researching "real" community needs, and providing a deeper theoretical grounding would have produced different results, possibly aligning student reports more with the social justice and community-oriented foci of many academic service-learning initiatives.

Use of Journals and Structured Reflection

Paulo Freire (1998) and numerous experiential educators (see Knapp, 1992, Kolb, 1984, and Seaman, 2008, for example) have all stressed that learning happens by making sense of our experiences through a reflective process. There is strong evidence in my study results that being a participant in a self-study and participating in this experiential education elective course and the structured reflection inherent in the study and course (journaling 24 hours post class and the focus group session) enhanced student learning, helping them to consider how they might apply this new learning in their own leadership and teaching practices. That said, in light of some of the comments about journaling, including Baker's comment, "journaling....again?" educators need to be aware of their use of journals as components of academic courses. As we know, journals can be an effective medium for facilitating reflection but are not necessarily and certainly not automatically so (Bennion & Olsen, 2002; Hayman, Wilkes, and Jackson, 2012).

Also, when students are simply handed a journal and asked to write about their experiences with little or no structure provided, journals are less effective (Dyment & O'Connell, 2003).

Poor "participation" with journaling was less of an issue generally for participants in my study but was an acute issue for one student who expressed that he was on the brink of dropping out of the study. This may actually have been the case for others without my knowing. There was certainly variance in the volume of writing between participant/student journals with some students writing pages of post-class notes and others simply writing to meet the study "requirement." Hayman, Wilkes, and Jackson (2012) assert that failure to participate in journaling can be attributed to many factors, including a lack of confidence to write, the length of time it requires, and anxieties associated with (over)exposure of thoughts and feelings. They recommend three strategies for promoting participation and increasing efficacy of journaling, including: coaching, limiting the journaling period, and follow-up contact.

Additionally, rote reflective "debriefs" that ask students to respond to something similar each week, for example, asking a student to share her "rose and thorn" moments after each new experience, to ensure a structured "debrief" occurs, can result in students responding in a mechanistic way rather than providing a forum for students to share new insights. Reflective experiences often result in students responding to what they think the teacher wants to hear (English, 2011; O'Connell & Dyment, 2011). I believe that further exploration of the ways in which journals are employed in course-based studies as well as course-based assessments is thus warranted.

The study confirms that most students face challenges with, and resistance to, student-directed pedagogy generally. As hooks (2003; 2010) and Shor (1996) suggest, it is not surprising that students express some resistance to student-directed classroom praxes in light of years of schooling that denies them formal authority. How do I and other professors address this resistance? Is resistance educative? bell hooks (2010) in her teaching workshops, queries, how do we cultivate a culture of "positive dissent" (p. 87)? emphasizing that "safe space" learning must involve critical exchanges. Once students begin to question the authenticity of shared authority (hooks, 2010; Shor, 1996), they become engaged in a push/pull experience with the professor; my study results resonate very closely with this as Heather described the push/pull tension of authority that she experienced. How to engage this questioning and resistance—rather than deny it—is central to engaged pedagogy (hooks).

"You still have control of the grades," is a common refrain that I hear after years of teaching this course. Drew's comment about less engagement as a result of not being graded on the service-learning assignment speaks to one of my own long-standing concerns. Horan (2004) likewise describes her own efforts with student-negotiated grading that failed to produce the liberatory results that she had hoped. Keesing-Styles (2000) counters that when students are involved in generating course assessments, they are more prepared and better able to identify which particular criteria are most relevant to their own contexts. This push/pull and tension is indicative of student-directed pedagogy.

There are no specific "recipes" for student-directed educative praxis (Breunig, 2008b; Keesing-Styles, 2003). As such, the pedagogue needs to shape classroom practices around the lives of students, the classroom context, the professor's abilities, and the educative aims of the practice. Freire (1998) refers to this as a way of living within our educative beliefs and our educative practices. For me, it is a step to bridge the aforementioned gap between *what* I teach and *how* I teach.

Jarvis (1996) explains, “Attempting to teach about positioning and critiquing dominant discourses calls into question my own abilities to examine positioning and to critique dominant discourses” (p. 11). I thus need to acknowledge my own subjectivity as “the” professor facilitating this course and its influence on my participation in both the curricular class activities and on the research project itself (Pivnick, 2003). In what ways did I maintain “control” either overtly or inadvertently? Drew captured this tension in suggesting that the service-learning project, in the end, would not have been as successful without my (over?) involvement.

How might I and other pedagogues committed to student-directed praxis be further served by research that supports our pedagogical development and provides us with reflective opportunities to both transform and be transformed with/in that? “Systematic, intentional study by teachers of their own classroom practice has proven its worth throughout the years” (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, viii). This observation resonates with the results and experiences of this study despite the tensions.

Many of the insights gleaned from this study provide potential for the ways in which I am informed and will transform subsequent courses, paying particular attention to those conclusions and recommendations made above. In summary, these include: 1) attention to specifically reframing and theoretically grounding the service-learning initiative, including the provision of more time and a focus on community engagement and social justice, 2) providing more coaching, mentoring, and regular check-ins about the journal project, 3) considering whether or not to more directly acknowledge the tensions of engaging in a student-directed classroom experience at the outset of a course, and 4) continuing to self-study. It was encouraging to hear Mac report, “I’ll keep the journal to direct me after the experience” and also interesting to note that Ed said, “I will think very carefully before making a democratic decision [as a teacher myself] because of how long they take.” These few comments do make me wonder about the ways in which engagement in the study, the service-learning initiative and the course itself informed and transformed students. How might I educate in such a manner as to further encourage examples of this? How is the school/community informed and transformed as the “recipient” of the service project? As is so often the case with such studies, I am left with as many questions as I am with answers and embrace the educative potential inherent in that tension.

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