

# Exploring the Role of the University Student as an Experiential Learner: Thoughts and Reflections from the 2013 Cohort of 3M National Student Fellows

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## Abstract

*In recent years, there has been a dynamic shift in the role of the university student through the creation and promotion of experiential learning opportunities on campuses across the country. Many post-secondary programs now include co-op placements, practicums, or internships where students can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world settings. However, in this article, we have chosen to focus on more “altruistic” forms of experiential learning – volunteerism, development work, and service-learning – which have gained increased focus in recent years but are often used, we feel, without appropriately reflecting on their meaning. In this article, we draw upon our experiences as student leaders to define each of these roles, outline what we see as the benefits of experiential learning for students, and provide recommendations for how these learning opportunities can continue to be improved. Moreover, we identify privilege, ethics, and responsibility as complexities related to experiential learning and discuss each of these topics in more detail. We end our discussion by addressing the role of experiential learning in helping to define the value of a post-secondary education.*

## Overview

The five of us represent half of the 2013 cohort of 3M National Student Fellows, the second cohort to be recognized since the establishment of the awards program. It was an honour and a privilege to be given the opportunity to develop and share a concurrent session on June 20, 2013 at the 2013 Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) conference concerning the role of the university student as a volunteer, development worker, and service-learner. This article is a combination of the thoughts, perspectives, and experiences discussed during our seminar, which we believe can be used as such opportunities continue to expand on campuses across the country. Given that our perspectives and experiences are varied, the statements in this article may reflect both individual and/or group opinions.

## Introduction

According to Jarvis et al. (1998), experiential learning is, “the process of creating and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses” (p. 67) – or in short, learning through doing. In recent years, there has been a dynamic shift in the role of the university student through the creation and promotion of experiential learning opportunities on campuses across the country. Many post-secondary programs now include co-

op placements, practicums, or internships where students can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world settings. Some institutions also offer specific for-credit courses that incorporate service-learning or community placements, while others have developed entire sets of not-for-credit opportunities that are based on experiential learning models.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, the National Student Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) reported that on average, 40.1% of senior post-secondary students across 577 institutions in Canada and the US felt that their universities had provided them with learning opportunities beyond the classroom including, “internships and co-ops, community service, study abroad, and a campus environment that promotes contact among students from different backgrounds” (NSSE, 2012).

For students, experiential learning has particular incentive in today’s society where opportunities beyond post-secondary education, particularly in the realm of employment, have become increasingly competitive. A report from the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) emphasizes that students can no longer necessarily compete in the “real world” simply because they have a diploma or degree in-hand; instead, they must seek new ways of distinguishing themselves as individuals and developing soft skills that cannot exclusively be taught in a classroom (CCL, 2008). According to a survey conducted among employers in British Columbia, the top five skills that employers look for in new hires are interpersonal, teamwork, problem solving, communication, and leadership, all of which are considered to be soft skills (BCBC, 2006). Although the focus of experiential learning often tends to be on job preparedness, there are many other positive outcomes of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). For example, experiential learning can help students move beyond the simple repetition of facts and theories and instead learn about complex issues that have local or global relevance. By doing so, students become able to develop critical thinking skills, and in turn, shape their identities. Experiential learning also helps students become more directly engaged with the communities and the individuals that they are working with, creating an opportunity for more meaningful learning experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Given the powerful benefits that can come from experiential learning, we predict that the prevalence of these opportunities will continue to increase across Canadian campuses. However, it is imperative that post-secondary institutions equip students with the proper knowledge and skills to navigate these roles so that they are of benefit to not only students, but also to the communities, groups, or individuals that they are working with. In this article, we reflect upon our own experiences as student leaders to address experiential learning from the perspective of current university students. We then propose ways in which these opportunities might be improved, discuss common experiential learning roles and related complexities, and address the role of experiential learning in helping to define the value of a post-secondary education.

## **Thoughts on Experiential Learning and Opportunities for Improvement**

*I recently travelled to Costa Rica and Nicaragua with an organization called VIDA on a medical missions trip. I took this trip with two intentions in mind: to give back to those less fortunate, and to experience what life could be like if I chose a career in the medical field. During my trip, I learned basic medical techniques that I was able to put into practice during six clinic days. I was able to communicate with patients, conduct physical examinations, and watch how other medical professionals helped others. Although I am by no means a medical expert, this trip gave me*

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<sup>1</sup> Several examples include, but are not limited to, the Peer Helper Program and Project Serve at the University of Guelph or Reading Week Projects at the University of British Columbia. In addition, many campuses also offer volunteer or work placements with community organizations or faculty research partners.

*insight into a realm that I would not have seen otherwise, and taught me things that no textbook could ever adequately explain.*

-Naythrah Thevathasan

Learning that happens through direct experience is often far more meaningful than that which is restricted to the four walls of a classroom. As student leaders, we have each benefited from experiential learning opportunities in numerous ways. For example, those of us who have completed co-op placements or internships have found that we are more competitive in the job market after graduation and have a clearer idea of our career aspirations than our peers who have not yet worked in their field of study. Others of us have found that experiential learning has helped to develop our critical thinking skills and kept us more engaged with our studies, allowing us to better understand the relevance of our post-secondary education.

Our roles as experiential learners have also allowed us to identify areas where such learning opportunities could be further developed or improved. One such area is the accessibility of experiential learning opportunities to a broad range of students. Though some experiential learning opportunities may be counted towards students' academic requirements, many are extracurricular in nature. This means that some of these opportunities may require a considerable amount of scheduling flexibility and financial resources, so students in highly rigorous or specialized academic disciplines or those without the necessary financial resources may be at a disadvantage. Thus, there is value in having some experiential learning opportunities that are for-credit in disciplines that tend to be more theoretical or conceptual such as the core sciences and economics.<sup>2</sup>

To more formally recognize students who have participated in experiential learning, many institutions have implemented the use of co-curricular transcripts. These are formal, institutionally-issued documents similar to an academic transcript, but instead recognizing learning opportunities that help students develop a specific set of skills. Co-curricular transcripts can “encourage and incentivize engagement ... by help[ing] students find and track experiences beyond the classroom, link those experiences to competencies, and validate those experiences on an official institutional document (Elias and Drea, 2013). However, in our experience, co-curricular transcripts often do not capture many activities that would otherwise serve as useful development opportunities. They are also not frequently recognized outside the realm of academia, for example by employers. Thus, post-secondary institutions should more thoroughly assess the types of opportunities that are recognized on co-curricular transcripts and determine if more opportunities could be recognized, or if perhaps recognition could occur in other forms such as teaching students how to “market” the skills that they have acquired through various learning opportunities more effectively. In addition, efforts should be made to connect with employers to identify what factors influence hiring decisions, and how co-curricular transcripts might be made useful in hiring processes.

We also believe that experiential learning without critical reflection is neither useful nor enlightening. Indeed, according to Kolb and Kolb (2005), “learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas” (p. 205). Experiential learning opportunities can easily be used as a means to fill the pages of a resume without really contributing to

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<sup>2</sup> An example of such a course is Civic Engagement & Service-Learning (UNIV\*3000) at the University of Guelph. In this course, “students ... develop civic leadership skills and increase their awareness and appreciation for the social relevance of higher education through a community service-learning experience ... Students will conduct research and seminars on a selected topic while simultaneously completing a placement in a community agency appropriate to that topic” (University of Guelph, 2013).

students' learning. At times, these opportunities can also be overwhelming for students, leading them to become paralyzed by the challenges and complexities that they have experienced. The process of critical reflection involves critiquing the presumptions on which beliefs have been built and evaluating the validity of one's understanding of a particular subject in a given context (Meizrow, 1990). Thus, critical reflection enables students to ask important "why" questions that will help them to challenge presumptions and beliefs, and ultimately, lead to transformative learning.

The timing of critical reflection is also important. Not only should students engage in critical reflection before and during experiential learning, but they should also do so after their learning experience is over, a step that in our experience is often forgotten. According to the Kolb Learning Cycle (1984), a widely used model of experiential learning, a final and important step of experiential learning is the translation of new conceptual understanding into "actionable" knowledge that can be applied to and used toward new experiences. Thus, it becomes important, particularly in the case of trips abroad, to encourage students to use experiential learning opportunities not only as for their own betterment, but also for the betterment of the local communities to which they are returning. Moreover, students returning home from communities that are very different from home can experience a "reverse culture shock"; thus, forums for discussion and reflection that promote critical thought serve as useful venues for students to deconstruct their experiences.

## **Types of Experiential Learning Opportunities and Related Complexities: Privilege, Ethics, and Responsibility**

Experiential learning opportunities encompass numerous student roles and activities. In this section, we will focus on more "altruistic" forms of experiential learning – volunteerism, development work, and service-learning– although we recognize that experiential learning also encompasses roles such as internships and co-op placements that prepare students for a range of career options following graduation. The terms that we have selected have gained increased focus in recent years, but are often used, we feel, without appropriately reflecting on their meaning. Based on our own experiences and reflections, we propose the following definitions and descriptions of these terms:

### **Volunteer**

*An individual who provides service to others with no tangible reward or benefit. Volunteer opportunities exist both within post-secondary institutions and in the broader community, and may be done on an individual level or part of an organized program.*

### **Development Worker**

*An individual who is both a leader and a pioneer, implementing new solutions to existing problems in their local or global community. Critical to being a good development worker is the ability to understand, respect, and incorporate the unique needs and challenges of the communities being served, and the ability to embrace the vision of a global community while working to make broader connections between local and global issues.*

### **Service-Learner**

*An individual who learns through engagement in and observation of a community within its existing framework. A good service-learner participates in the direct exchange and creation of*

*knowledge and experience at a given community service placement, which in some institutions may be connected to university courses taken for credit.*

Though we have defined them separately, we acknowledge that these terms can often blend together within different experiences. For example, several of us have travelled abroad as part of programs that were not explicitly labelled as either “development work” or “service-learning”, and were perhaps a mixture of both roles.

In our reflections, we have also identified three areas of complexity that pertain to each of these roles: privilege, ethics, and responsibility. These are areas that we feel both students and post-secondary students should be especially aware of and critically engaged with. In the coming sections, we will address each of these subjects and related complexities through personal experiences and views, and provide suggestions for how post-secondary institutions can better equip students to take on roles as volunteers, development workers, and service-learners.

## Privilege

*Through volunteering and service-learning, I've had the opportunity to learn and teach about different types of social mobility and privilege. Most of my experiences and learning have helped me develop an eye for recognizing situations where someone had abused their social privilege and how to call it out. However, I was never taught how to react to having my own privileges revealed. This resulted in feeling deflated and useless when I was told that using the phrase “screw that” was perpetuating rape culture through normalizing sexual violence. While service learners, development workers, and volunteers seem to be in a race to do good, I wish we were taught how to deal with being wrong. One of the benefits of experiential learning is the flexibility to make mistakes, and being vulnerable to that was one of my best lessons about privilege.*

-Gaurav Sharma

Students with access to post-secondary education have considerable privilege that includes, but is not limited to, social mobility and capital. This at times can both enhance and hinder the roles that we take on as university students. Inability to realize privilege can be a liability to building relationships through misrepresenting the thoughts or interests of a marginalized group, or by the perpetuation of prejudice and oppression, albeit unintentionally. Students, especially those in leadership positions, can also often feel burdened by the idea of privilege – for example, many of us have questioned why we are more deserving of an education or opportunities in life than someone else. In these situations, we have become empowered through becoming aware of our privileges, and using them for positive change by creating opportunities for others where they previously did not exist. We have learned that while formal education is indeed a privilege, learning does not have to be restricted to institutes of higher education. Learning opportunities for others can and should be created wherever possible. A goal of post-secondary institutions should be to teach students that they can use skills acquired through higher education to help others who may have less privilege.

Having privilege requires that students be aware of its impact and using it in solidarity with those who do not have it. However, some students may not be aware of the privileges they possess, or do not react constructively when others point out their privileges. For example, in a study by Ancis and Szymanski (2001), about 30% of White students studying counselling had a “lack of awareness and denial of White privilege” (p. 554). A refusal to acknowledge privilege is perhaps the most destructive for students who are working with marginalized groups or individuals. It is important for students to become educated not only about the privileges that they possess, but also how to use them for affirmative action where needed. Furthermore, it is

also critical that students learn to react constructively in situations where others point out their privileges. This is possible through self-reflection, which can help students to acknowledge the personal role(s) that they may play in oppression. Teaching privilege without encouraging students to be critical of it is not a very useful lesson. However, when students are given the tools to assess privilege, they can become both empowered and better aware of the power they possess.

## Ethics

*As part of my service-learning [teaching creative writing in a jail], I edited a publication of inmate writing, which meant that I was responsible for (mis)representing inmates' voices and identities to the "outside world." I was compelled to be aware of not only the power inherent in my role as an editor, but also in my position as a community service-learning student and as a university student, which influenced my approaches to editing. My ability to edit came from my general cooperation with the dominant education system, and in my role, I was imposing the standards of the same education system that often represents disappointment and failure for inmates' authorial voices.*

-Victoria Cowan

Universities are oftentimes viewed as ethical institutions; however, deciphering what our moral obligations are as students, particularly within the various roles that we may have, can prove challenging. Indeed, embedded understandings of power and privilege are just one set of challenges that require students' careful attention and negotiation in experiential learning opportunities. As Himley (2004) notes, experiential learning encounters such as community service-learning are "agitated, producing surprise and conflict, because any particular encounter between embodied subjects is always already framed by broader relations of power" (p. 418). Thus, it is important, arguably essential, for students to have a working understanding of ethics when partaking in volunteerism, development work, and service-learning. To us, ethics means working to understand, navigate, and mediate the workings and forms of power (and oppression) in and across environments and relationships. Ethics also encompasses the strength and initiative to adhere to a strong moral code that considers both individual and collective impact. When university students volunteer or engage in development work or service-learning, ethical boundaries can sometimes become blurred. University students may get lost in the struggle to become well-rounded scholars (i.e., better themselves), and lose sight of the altruistic motives behind the service they are providing and of the collective group in need. This can be a deterrent to groups who welcome students into their communities because ethics are integral in partnerships and convey a sense of respect, humanity, and good citizenship. As well, because students in these situations are, as Himley points out, "typically the ones who can and do cross borders, the ones who are mobile and accrue cultural capital through that mobility" (p. 425), it is necessary for them to recognize and take responsibility for their privilege in this respect with ethical actions and conduct.

From our perspective, ethical instruction should be practical, for example facilitating discussion on how students might govern themselves in a variety of difficult situations where ethical boundaries may be unclear. During ethical instruction, students should be encouraged to critically reflect on situations and roles on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup> The effects of students' actions

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<sup>3</sup> In many of our leadership roles, this type of training has been accomplished through the use of case studies or role-playing scenarios. It is most effective if these activities are based on real situations that could be encountered in a particular leadership role.

should be considered in relation to not only themselves but, moreover, in relation to the individuals that they are working with as well. Personal limitations should be acknowledged, since acting beyond capacity or ability can have detrimental effects on not only the student, but also the community that they are working with. However, students who believe that they are very familiar with a particular topic or community should still exercise caution and humility to ensure that the voices of those they are working with are not diminished. Thus, there must always be a subtle ebb and flow between critical thought, reflection, and action.

## Responsibility

*With Prince George Public Interest Research group, I was closely involved in the planning and research needed to develop an upgraded compost system at UNBC. I did a lot of the “dirty work,” carting compost from one side of campus to the next. I found that the response I got from my peers was that they appreciated the work and thought it was necessary. They recognized that volunteering in this manner was good, but decided they didn’t have time to contribute. When did we decide that someone else should be responsible for our waste, whether that someone is alive today or part of a future generation? This is just a tiny bite of the issue, but it shows that as students we need to start taking responsibility for ourselves and the impact we have on others.*

-Stephanie Doherty

The concept of responsibility is inextricably linked to experiential learning. Educators typically place focus on ensuring that students recognize the responsibilities that exist within their experiential learning – for example, listening to and learning about the culture of a community, or being aware of privilege and being mindful of how it can be navigated. However, it is also important to recognize that having a sense of responsibility is also important in students’ decision to take on a leadership role in their local or global community in the first place. It may be a struggle for some university students to realize the responsibility they have to themselves, their community, and their academic institution. Some students have a sense of innate responsibility to make the most of a higher education and be of service to others, whereas others do not. This creates a dichotomy where some students do so much that it becomes nearly overwhelming for them, whereas others navigate the world with a sense of disconnect and complacency. The goal of a post-secondary education should be to teach students to develop a sense of responsibility for the world around them and to challenge them to act on this responsibility. Part of issuing this challenge comes from incorporating, teaching, and practising self-awareness and critical reflection in higher education so that students feel a greater sense of ownership over their lives. This is something that can be taught only through practice, but it is integral to the distribution of responsibility of many in order to create and perpetuate sustainable leadership.

When teaching responsibility, the focus is far too often on the individual. According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), “educators who seek to teach personally responsible citizenship and researchers who study their programs focus on individual acts of compassion and kindness, not on collective social action and the pursuit of social justice” (p. 244). One person alone cannot solve complex problems; however, many people working together have significantly more power to create change. Working together also helps break large tasks into more manageable chunks, allowing students to feel less overwhelmed with what needs to be done. Different students may have different motives for getting involved; however, it is critical that the focus be not on individual motives, but on collective action. As Batson, Ahmad, and Tsang (2002) state, “the potential for the greatest good may come from strategies that orchestrate motives [for community

involvement] so that the strengths of one can overcome weaknesses of another” (p. 441-42). As a result, it becomes evident that the teaching of responsibility must not only focus on the individual, but also how they fit into a collective community.

## **The Role of Experiential Learning in the Relevance of a Post-Secondary Education**

*One of my recent volunteer experiences involved helping adult learners develop basic literacy skills that would help them be more independent and better function in our society. Most of the learners had not completed their high school education and faced significant barriers to their learning – poverty, addiction, or mental health issues. In my role, I found it immensely challenging to teach these learners basic skills such as reading, writing, or how to count money. I often caught myself thinking: “I am about to finish a five-year Bachelor of Science degree. I have almost two decades of educational experience – why am I finding it so difficult to teach others skills that I take for granted?” Part of me always came back to thinking about what we really learn in university. Are we just learning facts and theories, or can we actually use what we learn to help better our local and global communities?*

-Anita Acari

Universities are unique in their transience, meaning that they have the opportunity to influence a very large, diverse, and constantly changing community. In the context of higher education, experiential learning presents immense opportunities for future leaders and change-makers. In fact, it is one of the primary reasons that we feel that our own education has been of value. In a time where the relevance of a higher education has often been called into question, post-secondary institutions should champion the availability of these opportunities, and their importance in raising awareness about local and global struggles, bettering students’ understanding about what contributes to these struggles, encouraging students to make connections between local issues and global manifestations (and vice versa), and providing the mental and physical space to think critically about these issues and envision alternatives.

Universities should continue to foster community engagement and most importantly, to enable students to think critically about the issues that are prevalent in the community. This should not only be done via extracurricular activities, but in classrooms too. We have found ourselves most engaged in classes where we were able to discover, understand, discuss, debate, research, and teach others about issues, themes, and challenges that exist in our world and have relevance (or could have relevance) to us and our communities today. There is room for post-secondary institutions to form more community partnerships, which allow for the more direct transfer of student resources to communities and of community-based learning to students (Saltmarsh, Giles Jr., Ward, & Gaglione, 2009). Community-engaged scholarship can strengthen faculty and student engagement with local, national, and international communities of interest, and train faculty and students in knowledge mobilization. Oftentimes, community organizations do not have the capacity to acquire or interpret the latest scholarly research; thus, there is room for faculty and students to work with these organizations to fill mutual research needs (Saltmarsh et al., 2009).<sup>4</sup> Universities also have the capacity to promote and support both small and large-scale events where students can volunteer to assist a community organization either directly by

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<sup>4</sup> The Research Shop at the University of Guelph “serves as a portal between community and university research needs. Faculty and students work with community organizations and individuals to identify and address social problems, and develop policies for positive change” (University of Guelph, 2014).



filling a particular service role within the organization, or indirectly by helping to create or acquire the resources that are needed to meet organizational needs.

## **Conclusion**

Through experiential learning opportunities, universities provide an environment that contributes to the development of the “holistic scholar,” one that is not only engaged with their studies, but also the local and global community. However, such opportunities are only truly enriching if there are proper tools in place to help students navigate them. To summarize the main messages that we wish to impart, we believe that experiential learning opportunities should:

- 1) Continue to be encouraged, supported, and validated by post-secondary institutions with the belief that they can contribute to helping students become balanced individuals who have a holistic understanding of the world through learning both inside and outside the classroom;
- 2) Become a formal requirement of more academic programs, particularly those with a heavy theoretical component or rigorous academic requirements that might otherwise prevent student engagement outside of the classroom. This can be done through the creation of experiential learning opportunities for credit and/or the transformation of the classroom into a forum for discussing and validating student’s prior experiences;
- 3) Be seen as important not only in helping to shape students’ career paths and making them more competitive upon graduation, but also (and much more importantly) in helping to shape students’ identities, characters, and fostering good citizenship;
- 4) Involve teaching and encouraging students to critically reflect upon the role(s) that they are taking on before, during, and after any experiential learning experiences. Students should be given a forum in which they can learn about whom they will be working with, voice unease, ask questions, and deconstruct experiences of power and privilege.

As we move forward, we feel that it is imperative to emphasize the need for a platform of discussion between educators and university students to help students ask questions, voice thoughts and feelings, and reflect upon the roles that they are taking on. It is important for academic institutions to continually discuss how they can better support students as current pedagogy broadens to include experiential learning. We wish to leave you with the following questions to aid in this ongoing dialogue in the future:

- How might we structure experiential learning opportunities so that the benefits outweigh the costs both financially and otherwise?
- How might we help students who have privilege become empowered to use it to create positive change where it is needed?
- How can we encourage students to understand, navigate, and mediate the forms and workings of power and to effect change where needed?
- How might we help students feel a greater sense of responsibility toward themselves, their institutions, and most importantly, the communities in which they live?
- How might universities ensure that students leave with an education that will help them not only with personal goals, but also the tools and skills needed to contribute to the betterment of both the local and global community?

## **Acknowledgements**

We are incredibly grateful to those who made the 3M National Student Fellowship possible and contributed a large amount of time and effort. In particular, we extend our sincere thanks to members of the Coordination Team: Alice Cassidy, Natalie Gerum, Valerie Lopes, Mandy Frake-Mistak, Laura Goldstein, Barbara Kerr, Kari Marken, and Shannon Murray. Special thanks to Natalie and Kari for their expert help and guidance with developing our concurrent sessions and conference plenary. We are also grateful to the 2013 team of adjudicators, as well as Arshad Ahmad, Angie Kolen, Sylvia Avery, Muriel McKay, Sean Conley, Elizabeth Wells, and Ron Marken. Special thanks to Greg Snow and 3M Canada for your generous contributions to the program and everyone at Cape Breton University for their organization and hospitality. We also extend thanks to the CELT Editorial Team, two anonymous reviewers, and Lenore Latta from the University of Guelph. And finally, to our dedicated friends and family, thank you for being there for us every step of the way – we wouldn't be us without you.

## Biographies

The 3M National Student Fellowship Award was introduced in 2012 to honour undergraduate students in Canada who have demonstrated qualities of outstanding leadership and who embrace a vision where the quality of their educational experience can be enhanced in academia and beyond. Read the full bios of the second cohort at <http://www.stlhc.ca/awards/3m-national-student-fellowships/2013-2/2013-recipients/>.

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