Improving Student Reflection in Experiential Learning Reports in Post-Secondary Institutions

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Abstract

Work-integrated learning options—or experiential learning—(such as co-operative education, practicum placements, and community service learning/volunteer placements) offer much scope for enhancing educational opportunities for post-secondary students to learn about the workplace and to develop skills that may contribute to their future employability. However, community service learning (CSL) placements and co-operative education (co-op) programs, among other forms of experiential learning, offer so much more than the practical outcomes of skills-development and résumé-building. They provide a space for reflexivity on the student's positionality in relation to privilege and national and/or global citizenship identity-formation; for critical reflection on ethical issues; for the promotion of social justice; and for praxis (the application of knowledge). The research presented in this article is an evaluation of two sets of experiential learning reflection assignments: co-op work-term reports (from 2nd, 3rd, 4th year and graduate students) and CSL papers (assignments submitted for a fourth year class I taught in winter 2016 on experiential learning). I examine the common themes and differences between these two sets of assignments with particular attention to the preparation and facilitation of learning in both instances, and the difference this preparation makes in terms of the student's critical reflection.

Keywords: work-integrated learning, co-operative education, service learning, reflective learning

1. Introduction

Post-secondary students have access to a wide range of practicum or experiential learning options, or to use the language of the Ontario government's Higher Education Quality Council (HEQCO), work-integrated Learning (WIL) styles. The typology of WIL includes apprenticeships, field experience, mandatory professional practice, co-op, internships, applied research projects and service learning (Sattler & Peters, 2013) among the diverse choices available to many Canadian students in post-secondary studies. These diverse programs are associated with several primary advantages including enhancing a résumé, improving employability, and establishing a fit with a potential career. The primary advantages are linked strongly to perceived earning potential, increased chances of finding employment, and having additional income (particularly for co-op students). Among the secondary benefits are increased maturity (often explained as personal growth), application of theory, and creating networks (Sattler & Peters, 2013). The advantages of work-integrated learning are supported by the scholarly literature for which the focus on career prospects, employability, extension of skills and income potential are identified as core motivations and outcomes for a variety of experiential learning options (Landgon & Agyeyomah, 2014; Lough, McBride, & Sherraden, 2009).

However, the primary focus on employability is highly limiting from an educational perspective. Moreover, a focus on skills-development is insufficient for community-engaged learning and for moving "beyond skills and instead learn[ing] to develop solidarity with those that are struggling" (Landon & Agyeyomah, 2014, p. 62). Experiential learning also offers immense opportunities for connecting theory to practice for the purpose of addressing social problems and an "enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). It is this latter set of advantages that foster a comprehensive learning experience for students. This article explores those advantages in greater detail and argues that the experiential learning placements themselves (co-op jobs, internships, volunteer work, etc.) alone do not constitute the complete educational component. Rather, it is the opportunity for facilitated critical reflection and analysis of these experiences that enable a comprehensive and meaningful education. The focus of this facilitated critical reflection is on the links between work-integrated

learning placements outside the classroom and in-classroom reflection. Yet, it is important to note that reflective learning on "real world" issues can be fostered in regular classroom learning (Smith, 2007) as well. Reading, reflection and critical engagement on important questions related to one's positionality and in relation to those with whom we work, among other thoughtful and analytical lenses, serve as the starting points for reflective learning and teaching, but especially so for praxis-oriented experiential learning opportunities. As such, positionality, or our situated knowledge, is of central importance to making sense of our interactions in the communities where we work since no individual is an objective or neutral observer of the world. Observations of the world are influenced by experiences and identities and they shape how we interpret what and how we see. Drawing on feminist contributions to methodology and epistemology, I argue for a reflexive process of experiential learning which begins with a deeper analysis of one's positionality and situated knowledge and how these shape our interpretations of Canadian and global citizenship identities. Such an approach is informed by a (de)colonizing of pedagogies (MacDonald, 2014)—a process informed by colonial continuities by which our desire to see and know the world is an aspect of the colonial impulse to know and experience the "other". This is particularly true for experiential learning programs that often entail privileged students volunteering and working in less privileged communities. MacDonald (2014) extends the discussion beyond positionality (such as reflections on privilege) to an analysis of how pedagogy itself is colonized and how colonial narratives and styles are reproduced through the privileging of some forms of written materials (reports or peer-reviewed journal articles) over other means of learning such as poems or story-telling. Examples of de-colonizing the curriculum also include opportunities for students to learn from knowledge holders outside of academia (lectures and readings) through experiential learning options.

Observations of experiential learning (whether international or in Canada through CSL and co-op) point to frequently missed opportunities for adequate preparation, evaluation and reflection, as well as some valuable experiences with hyper-critical reflexivity and praxis. In this paper, I analyze two distinct approaches to facilitating experiential learning (co-op programs and course-specific CSL placements): their limitations and opportunities for critically-reflective learning and praxis. The main finding from this research underscores the importance of course instructor facilitation, clear guidelines, access to readings on critical pedagogy, built-in requirements for reflexivity, and institutional commitments to this process in order for experiential learning programs to facilitate deep critical reflection and praxis.

2. Exploring the Possibilities of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning offers an alternative educational paradigm that builds on the importance of praxis in the learning experience and can be summarized as interpretive and critical. An interpretivist framework highlights subjectivity and critical reflection on the role of the researcher or student in influencing those with whom they interact. In an educational setting, an interpretivist educational model engages educators as reflective practitioners who are able to facilitate an enhanced understanding of students' practical engagements in the world by beginning with questions pertaining to self and "other" (Palmer, 1998). A deeper understanding involves a broader focus on the social, political, historic and economic forces shaping the pedagogies, curriculum policies and schooling system in which teachers are immersed. Such an interpretive orientation is essential for teachers wishing to adopt more student-centered pedagogies such as constructivist approaches to teaching and learning" (Taylor & Medina, 2016, p. 11). A critical and alternative education paradigm begins with an understanding of broader structural issues that facilitate inequality and global challenges. In this educational paradigm students are educated to be critical thinkers capable of addressing complex problems through multidisciplinary ways. A political component is often the focus of critical educational models including strategies to transform "socially unjust social structures, policies, beliefs and practices" (Taylor & Medina, 2016, p. 6) for the purpose of addressing societal power imbalances.

Despite advances in the educational literature on paradigm shifts needed in educational models (in terms of praxis, critical reflection, subjectivity and positionality, power and inequality), a highly positivist approach to teaching continues to be a common model in university education. The university classroom is therefore highly constructed as a space for re-producing positivist values in which theorizing international problems and challenges provides the credentials necessary to act. Education is often framed, then, in a positivist framework—or as Giroux calls it—a traditional model which is centred on questions pertaining to "how" the world works rather than "why" a particular set of results are expected or warranted (Giroux, 1988). An alternative or post-positivist approach to learning facilitates other methods of making sense of the world including participant observation and greater interaction between the student and the research/practice community.

When the purpose of an education is reduced to descriptive inquiry (asking how rather than why) and to employability, educational approaches seldom promote critical reflection on the social, political and economic relations that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Through the positivist educational model, university education is instrumentalized for the purpose of preparing students for jobs. Evidence of the value placed on employability are apparent in the Government of Ontario's report on "Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario's Postsecondary Sector: The Experience of Ontario Graduates" (Sattler & Peters, 2013). Work-integrated learning includes the broad scope of practical opportunities for students ranging from apprenticeships to co-op placements to service learning. The report highlights findings with more than 10,000 survey participants who noted "gaining practical work experience, enhancing their résumés, improving employability skills and determining their fit with a potential career or industry as the influential reasons for participation in Work-Integrated Learning options" (Sattler & Peters, 2013, p. 9).

Alternately, critical pedagogy provides avenues for re-thinking the way that education takes place and the purpose it can serve. A practical model of a critical education or praxis-oriented approach to learning is offered by David Kolb (1984). In Kolb's diagram of learning style, Kolb provides a visual representation of the ongoing process of thinking, learning, doing, reflecting, theorizing and so on in a continuous fashion. As Kolb, and his model, demonstrate, education can be facilitated in non-instrumentalist and non-linear ways. Critical pedagogy calls into question the instrumentalist and one-directional approach to education in terms of its limitations for facilitating comprehensive education, "whole-student" learning and praxis.

Among the 20th century revival of philosophical understandings of praxis is that of Hannah Arendt's theory of action in which Arendt argues that praxis is the highest and most sophisticated level of active life (Arendt, 1958). The political action that arises from praxis constitutes the realization of human freedom. The nature of a praxis-oriented education is to ensure "reflection and action [is] directed at the structures to be transformed" (Freire, 1972, pp. 41-58). For Giroux (1988), the potential for praxis begins with a "critical pedagogy" that examines the different ways in which cultural domination play out in institutions (schools, for example) and broader cultural practices (society). These insights underscore the need for critical pedagogy in experiential learning programs where theoretical and practical learning is the very essence of experiential learning and for which students are prepared as "thinking" humans capable of achieving "human freedom" and freedom from their oppressions.

While experiential learning programs appear to be the ideal approach to facilitating critical pedagogy, these programs also have their limitations in facilitating critical reflection and praxis when offered without proper guidance and training. Thus, even "experiential learning" options can be largely one-directional when pitched as the application of classroom learning in real-world context. They can also be instrumentalist if defined and organized with only employability in mind. Even as we accept the need for more experiential learning opportunities, I argue for a much more carefully constructed educational model that facilitates learning/action reflection such that students continue to make theoretical sense out of their practical work experiences. Such an effort requires the right resources and structure to ensure that praxis takes place. To do so, we must create space pre- and post-placement for critical reflection on our practical work experiences in order to address: 1). The ethical implications of our involvement in experiential/practicum learning (particularly when our work involves working with marginalized groups); 2). Our positionality in relation to those with whom we work, and how our embodied experiences and what we can "know" as a result of our positionality shape our experiences (as women, men or trans*, by racialized experiences, by age, education level, socio-economic class, abled bodies-ness, or citizenship etc.); and 3). Our national identities as Canadians, etc., and/or global citizens. These reflections are central for students to make sense of the relevance of what is learned (Smith, 2007, pp. 85-91).

Experiential learning in Canada also offers unique opportunities for learning and teaching Canada by exposing students to the day-to-day realities of living and working in the Canadian context or how their experiences as Canadians affect their interpretations of the world. My reflections on alternative ways of experiencing and engaging in the world draw on a body of feminist and post-colonial scholarship dedicated to deconstructing notions of neutral, objective observations of the world. An analysis of ourselves, our communities and our world begins with, as Haraway (1991) has argued, a recognition of our situated knowledges (what we can fully know) and the ways of knowing that are heavily marked by identities (gender, class, race, nationality, ability, etc.). Our points of view and how we produce knowledge are thereby constructions based on our positioning in terms of identities, geographic locations, histories and experiences. These identities, however, are relational, can change over time and are continuously "interpreted and constructed" (Geiger, 1990, p. 171).

Making sense of positionality and how our locations and identities influence how we interpret the world involves critical reflection on the nature of social relations that emerge from our positionality and interactions with other

people, particularly in terms of power dynamics that emerge from these social relations. Reflecting on privilege and our positioning within social relations enables a reflexivity that can foster an improved understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we interact. A reflexive process is thus one in which we are aware of our influence on—and contribution to—communities where we do research, engage in practical work experience or volunteer. In contrast to positivistic approaches to science and observations on the world, reflexivity is used to acknowledge that assumptions about culture and practice are deeply held as a result of our lived experiences and exposures, and that power relations are abundant and significant in all that we do.

An advanced reflexive process that incorporates a critical analysis of positioning (identities, locations and social relations) may incorporate a post-colonial lens that shapes our understanding of positionality in the context of particular historical relations around colonial power and domination. The pedagogy of decolonization employs a post-colonial lens to examine the role of "settlers" in relation to land and territory as additional markers of power imbalance, and privilege as constituted in symbolic and material realities. The process of decolonization in pedagogy begins with recognition that there are many ways of knowing, learning and doing. Decolonizing pedagogies is thus more than the metaphor of "unlearning". It includes efforts towards new alliances and new strategies for addressing social injustices (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

3. Critical Pedagogy through the Lens of Two Experiential Learning Options (Co-op and CSL)

In this section, the analysis emerging from critical (and de-colonizing) pedagogy and feminist epistemology is examined in relation to two experiential learning options (co-op and CSL). I draw on my experience as an educational facilitator for both of these options (as Co-op Coordinator from 2014 to present and my facilitation of CSL as part of course learning). Before turning to the findings from empirical data collected from each of these experiences, I offer a brief introduction to the definitions for each of these programs.

The Ontario government defines co-op as "[a]cademic study that alternates with paid work experience developed and/or approved by the college/university" (Sattler & Peters, 2013, p. 16). The educational purposes of co-op are expressed as: integration of theory and practice, career exploration and development, progressive skill acquisition, provisionally socialization, workplace literacy, workforce readiness" (Sattler & Peters, 2013, p. 16). The co-op program at the University of Ottawa is designed to ensure students apply concepts learned in class during paid work terms. The summary provided by the University of Ottawa goes on to note that co-op offers experience in the field of study that can facilitate a network of valuable contacts: advantages that are directly and explicitly linked to finding a job more easily after graduation.

Community service learning—or service learning (as it is defined by the Ontario government) is characterized as "[s]tudent projects to address identified community needs and global issues" (Sattler & Peters, 2013, p. 16). The main educational purposes are summarized as: "integration of theory and practice, address specific community needs, community building, civic engagement, global citizenship, career exploration and development, skill development and personal development" (Sattler & Peters, 2013, p. 16). The University of Ottawa defines CSL as "a credited educational experience, that is (a) conducted as part of a course, during which (b) students participate in a structured volunteer service placement (volunteer activities) designed to meet a community need/priority, and (c) critically reflect on their in-community placement learning to develop a better understanding of materials presented in class and of their field of study" (University of Ottawa, 2018). Courses that contain CSL components must ensure the CSL placements are well connected to the course objectives and require CSL students to critically reflect on the link between their placement experience and the course material. CSL placements are linked to co-curricular records that serve as a demonstration to future employers that the students have indeed gained some practical work experience.

The difference in definitions between co-op and CSL offer some initial insights into some important distinctions made between these learning opportunities; whereby co-op focuses more on employability and CSL is more directly tied to civic engagement. Defining these programs in this way and promoting experiential learning to students with this particular discourse may well shape the expectations of—and approach taken—by students. However, both experiential learning options offer possibilities for critical reflection, civic engagement and praxis when facilitated with these objectives in mind.

4. Methodology, Sample and Overview of Reports

To consider the impact of critical reflection and analysis, the study draws on written reports submitted by 75 co-op students and 10 CSL students. All of the participants completed consent forms. Anonymity was guaranteed so pseudonyms are used here to accompany the comments provided. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board.

For co-op students a final work-term report must be submitted at the end of each co-op placement. Students are encouraged to summarize and describe their work environment, their tasks and the skills they learned. There are few guidelines provided to students and the guidelines are centrally designated by the Faculty of Social Science. Thus, when students request input on how to complete their work-term reports, they are encouraged to go beyond the limiting guidelines provided to them and to offer a critical reflection and discussion of what they learned and how they learned through their co-op program. However, co-op reports are read by the co-op work placement supervisor so students may feel uncomfortable with this audience reading critical reflections, a further limitation of the co-op procedures. There are no required or recommended readings provided to students through the co-op program guidelines. The co-op program offers a series of four-month placements for students to get paid work experience in their field of interest. Undergraduate students complete three co-op terms and graduate students complete two co-op terms (on average). Requirements for each co-op placement include supervisor evaluation reports as well as a work-term report to summarize and reflect on the skills learned in this work placement.

Students in my academic unit have worked in a range of placements, mostly within Canada. The majority of placements were located in government departments: Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Global Affairs Canada, Health Canada as well as other government departments. Only a few students are placed each year with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) due to limited resources available to NGOs to employ co-op students. There are also students who work in private companies or for the University of Ottawa. Overall, students tend to write about the hard skills learned (such as competency in excel software). Based on empirical analysis of the different skills learned in co-op programs combined with broader experiences in the facilitation of experiential learning, I highlight that there is great need for more emphasis on the cycle of learning, praxis and critical reflection in co-op programs and reporting.

For completion of the CSL reports, however, course instructors have much more scope for providing guidelines, suggestions, recommended readings and preparatory insights. There is, however, significant variation across the CSL course offerings at the University of Ottawa and I do not examine these diverse approaches here. For my course, the students were required to write a CSL report as part of their course assignments which was worth 35% of the final grade and provides an alternative to a traditional essay or research paper for the course. The components of a CSL report must include a summary of the CSL placement (the who, what, where, and how); a discussion of what the student learned (practical skills as well as what was learned about themselves); a thoughtful analysis of how material learned in my class (lectures and readings on critical theory and experiential learning with attention to ethics, power, citizenship, preparation and colonialism) played out in their experiential learning; and explicit reflection on ethical and positionality-oriented issues they experienced. Throughout the course, we examined positionality and ethics in relation to social justice in great depth. Students completed 2-4 readings on critical theory and experiential learning each week over a period of 13 weeks. There were also videos, lectures, presentations and class discussions pertaining to critical reflection that guided the students' reflections on their CSL placements throughout the academic term. Students were encouraged to consider, for example, CSL work involving reports on housing in aboriginal communities in relation to the assumptions we may make about aboriginal people who are spatially, historically and socio-economically disadvantaged in Canada. Students were asked to consider how their own lived experiences as (relatively) privileged, educated individuals influences how we see and understand the people for whom we are advocating and/or writing up reports. Since this is a course in the School of International Development and Global Studies, students were asked to consider parallels between the marginalization of communities in Canada and marginalized communities in the Global South, and how Canadian government policies and practices address (if at all) systems of poverty and inequality. Students were also encouraged to think about their/our own complicity in the injustices observed and studied by virtue of not raising bigger questions of ethics and social justice. Additionally, students were encouraged to imagine different or alternate approaches when employing new tactics or strategies for learning from and with each other. Experiential learning programs such as CSL offer a superb venue for this kind of critical reflection and analysis.

5. Findings Based on the Reports and Voices of the Students Engaged in Co-op and CSL

While there is a great deal of diversity in the nature of co-op program reporting, most co-op reports are more descriptive than analytical. There was one co-op report, however, that stood out for which the student provided an exceptional reflection on colonialism and the way that colonialism is perpetuated in work carried out within a Canadian federal government department. Most reports summarize the nature of the tasks performed with some discussion on skills learned while performing these tasks. Much of the reflection is centered on skills such as ability to write short reports in short periods of time, organizing meetings or conferences, or working in team

environments. These skills are highly valuable ones and the articulation of these skills in itself is an important skill.

With the help of a research assistant who coded the co-op reports, the skills were tracked across 75 reports. The most commonly noted top 10 skills identified by the co-op participations were (in order of most commonly cited to least commonly cited): writing skills, research skills, computer skills, analytical skills, how the public service functions, team work, communication in a group setting, second language acquisition, time management and independent work skills.

Many students focused exclusively on skills learned such as attention to detail, time management, organization and concise writing skills. As Helen (Note 1) noted: "Drafting social media content develops a specific style of written communication that must be concise and to the point, remaining within the 140-character limit on Twitter. I already had a strong ability with written communication, but learning how to be more concise with my writing was extremely valuable in this situation. I learned very quickly how to express myself in a direct and clear way, and also learned the best ways to shorten a tweet without affecting the meaning of the message".

Evidence of skills development and future employability was also highlighted. Caroline, for example, said: "It gave me an idea of what sort of work I will continue to do as a student and what I am likely to continue doing soon after graduation". Another student, Sean, noted that the co-op placement gave him the "opportunity to broaden my knowledge and skill-base by working on various national security files".

Approximately half of the co-op reports made reference to how their co-op placement experiences can support future course work and just under one-half made a general link to course materials and how previous courses supported their placements or did not provide the background and support required. These reflections were generally provided in vague terms noting a link but without concrete examples. As Jo said: "A good work ethic is imperative to succeeding in university which is also transferable to the workplace; I developed a good attitude and work ethic in my first two years of university which was reflected in my work at [the organization]. Research papers are often a large part of my workload in the [student's home department] and the research, analytical, and writing skills that I have developed at university enabled me to contribute to [the organization's] research without needing much guidance. [Student's home department] has provided me with a clear understanding of what development means, why it is important, the difficulties of development, and various development methodologies and theories; I was able to apply this knowledge to each project that I worked on during my co-op term."

Some co-op students also reflected on their personal growth as a result of their experience. Nancy said: "After only six months, I feel as if I am a new person. I have taken on so much responsibility and have failed at many things while in this position but I've also succeeded in tremendous ways".

Students also reflected on their preferences for working independently or with greater supervision. While these are more thoughtful analyses of their strengths and assets, the discussion falls short of reflecting on the experiences they had in terms of positionality, how they negotiated power relations and how their actions had consequences for others within the organization. Students rarely reflect on the ethical implications of the work they are doing even when they know that some of the work may be paternalistic, colonial or problematic for recipient communities. As such, the normalization of a particular perceived place of Canada and Canadians in the world is reinforced and sustained.

For co-op students who had the opportunity to work abroad and to reflect on cross-cultural issues, attention to their own identity as an "outsider" was highlighted in greater detail. As Zoe noted: "Despite some differences in personality and work ethic, I found all of my fellow work-mates in the Secretariat to be quite pleasant outside of the office. The level of team spirit within the group was at least as high, if not higher, than that experienced in my previous work terms. However, I occasionally felt that I did not fit in that well due to the fact that I was mostly unable to speak or understand [the local language], while my work-mates almost always resorted to [this local language] over English when socializing. I generally found myself more isolated from the … population … Even so, being in [this country] gave me the benefit of glimpsing a different side of [this country's] culture than what I had experienced before, and gave me the chance to see sights in the surrounding area that I would not have seen had I left Asia in the summer." The student stops short, however, in reflecting on her national identity as a Canadian and of the implications of her limited language skills in the host country. She indicated that she felt left out because her colleagues did not speak English while socializing and does not take this to the next level to consider the neo-colonial baggage and privileged expectations that accompany this kind of critique.

Students engaged in CSL placements were much more comprehensive in their discussions of critical reflections and ethics-related issues encountered than the co-op students. However, as I note later in this article, this

capacity for critical reflection is directly linked to the facilitation of CSL in comparison to co-op programs. Like with the co-op reports, there was a range in the quality of critical reflection and employment of theory in the papers. However, some of the most critical insights included Shannon's comments: "While pushing students into a setting beyond their comfort zone is an achievement in its own right, without a complementary education that emphasizes a sense of cosmopolitan solidarity, global citizenship education in its present [form] is half-hearted in creating truly global citizens. This is not without consequence; currently, global citizenship learning reproduces notions of Western superiority in students. Students come away feeling as if they are the caretakers of the [marginalized communities], that they have the ability to solve global issues simply from Western know-how. This is harmful knowledge that perpetuates the marginalization of the other".

Another particularly powerful critical reflection included Sal's reflections on national identity as a Canadian and a critical race analysis of his experience as a Canadian of diverse heritage who was teaching English as a second language to foreign-born students. Sal noted: "an identity must be both claimed and accepted by others to be regarded as legitimate. I can only be "Canadian" if I construct myself as Canadian and others accept me as such. For instance, I was not a Canadian when certain participants ceased speaking with me upon finding out that I was [cultural and national identity]—I was not seen as "authentically Canadian". Similarly, when parents or employers say they would prefer a "White" teacher, they presume that I am not "authentically Canadian," thus, though I construct myself as such, I cease to be Canadian. Because of this conflict, I have at times taken extra efforts to construct myself as Canadian: changing my display name on WeChat to include a Canadian flag, reaffirming that I am Canadian in conversations, pretending I do not speak any [other language], and so on. But after questioning these actions, I realize that I was doing these things to pursue power. I remember telling a friend on my last trip abroad: "I wish I could be White and teach in [foreign country x]; it would make the experience so much more interesting and enjoyable." I thus took efforts to construct myself as a "White-washed [racially and ethnically]-Canadian" in an attempt to profit from what I term as "coded White privilege'."

Carefully prepared students who have spent time reading and reflecting on experiential learning have found ways to use their CSL placements as important networking and collaboration activities, to feel part of a community and as active agents of change. As Allen (a foreign-born Canadian) argued: "My current CSL placement has connected me with Canadian activists to eradicate statelessness from Canada and around the world. This is [an] incredibly great opportunity and experience for a kind of individual like me who is highly motivated and interested to work not only in the field of international development, but also in global justice and equality including fighting statelessness".

Furthermore, reflections on positionality throughout classroom discussions and in course readings facilitated a deep reflection on privilege, complexity and inequality. As one student commented: "There was a lot that I was able to take away from this CSL experience. Through this volunteer experience, I was able to be critical of my own privileges while also being able to examine safety issues or challenges women throughout the Ottawa region might face through an intersectional approach, being considerate of other factors such as race, class or levels of ability. I feel that through this experience I was able to gain a better understanding of barriers and safety concerns facing women within the Ottawa region. I feel that this experience not only had me develop a better understanding of challenges facing women in the Ottawa region specifically, but allowing me the opportunity to be critical of intersecting barriers that can restrict individuals in their access to social or health services, employment, and other services that allow an individual to be secure and independent."

6. Analysis: Making Sense of the Student Reflections

There are notable distinctions between the feedback and reflections provided in the co-op reports and the CSL placements. The major differences between these two assignments are: 1) The level of students (the majority of the co-op reports were prepared by students in second, third, and fourth year as well as graduate students) while the CSL papers were written by fourth-year students; and 2) The amount of preparation and guidance that went into the lead-up to the CSL report-writing. The preparation for co-op students was highly limited with a short list of guidelines that focused more on description than analysis versus the CSL placements which centred around a semester-long course including course readings, videos, lectures, presentations and in-course time provided for CSL placements and reflections—all of which focused on a range of scholarly debates in the field of experiential learning from thick and thin global citizenship identity (Cameron, 2014) to neo-colonialism and critical theory. As such, the CSL students had ample support and guidance throughout the course from me as the course instructor but also from each other and from the host organizations where they were working, and from their required readings. The nature of deep reflection characteristic of the CSL papers echoes the findings of other scholars who have found that CSL enables students to "acquire greater self-efficacy and self-knowledge" (Simons & Cleary, 2006, p. 315). Self-efficacy and self-knowledge were important skills learned through CSL

placements and the corresponding reflections and they facilitated critical analysis of their actions, positionality, and the outcomes of their actions that created a sense of personal effectiveness (Astin et al., 2000). Furthermore, service learning has been linked to improved understandings of social justice (Kajner et al., 2013), and local and national politics and issues of diversity (Simons & Cleary, 2006).

Kenyon's reflections on experiential learning in a methodologies course also employ Kolb's multi-stage and cyclical model of experiential learning and highlighted how students in her course "cycled through stages of concrete experience, reflective observation and discussion, envisioning abstract concepts, and active experimentation. The course as a whole was structured around these four stages with respect to both method and substance" (Kenyon, 2016) and facilitated a richness of learning objectives.

In spite of the many advantages that experiential learning options provide, there are still many challenges and limitations in relation to highly effective, critically-informed learning. For example, opportunities for reflection and analysis may be limited by the nature of the assignments required, the experience of the program facilitators and also latent structural challenges of education pitched in highly instrumentalist terms. As such, the post/positivist approach to education easily slips into experiential learning programs with emphasis on instrumental and uni-directional learning whereby the experiential learning opportunity is considered in relation to improving a résumé and finding a job. Experiential learning, when employed through a critical pedagogy lens, nevertheless, provides alternative approaches for making sense of the world, the lived realities of the people around us, and our own positionality in relation to the people encountered. Encouraging critical reflection and deep analysis (guided by readings, discussions, and class discussions) before, during and after the CSL placement allows the student to imagine and analyze their positionality, power relations, and roles in producing and/or reinforcing power relations. As such, there are important ethical implications of experiential learning that require unpacking. Educational training through experiential learning affords students the opportunity to consider these ethical issues, to think about themselves as members of a community and their role as Canadians at home and/or abroad, about their relative privilege, their historical, geographical and socio-economic baggage, and what their actions mean for sustaining or changing social injustices.

7. Conclusion

The value of co-op education and CSL as forms of experiential learning can indeed be seen to change the way students learn in diverse educational contexts. However, the quality of this learning can be limiting and superficial without proper facilitation and reflection. A praxis-oriented approach is essential to the learning cycle of any educational experience. The focus on work-integrated—or experiential—learning and the growing emphasis on a range of experiential learning options within university education (Note 2) mean that more effort needs to be made to ensure that the breadth and depth of learning takes place through a combination of theoretical reflection and practical engagement in the world. Kolb's model provides a useful reminder of the cyclical fashion of learning and the need to return to critical reflection and abstract conceptualization (thinking and theorizing) before we move into active experimentation. However, it is only once we have positioned ourselves in the world by "doing" and having concrete experiences that we are truly capable of deeper reflection and conceptualization. Thus, assignments designed to facilitate experiential learning need to have built-in mechanisms to enable students to move beyond the uni-directional reflection on how "what was learned in the classroom shapes how practical work is carried out" to encouraging students to generate political analysis out of their practical work experiences and to reflect more on how these acts of doing or concrete experience can facilitate improved thinking and theorizing when they return to classroom spaces and beyond (after they leave university). Promoting this cyclical nature of experiential learning (thinking, doing, reflecting, theorizing) has been met with great enthusiasm from the students. However, the desire on the part of students to engage in this critical reflection must be met with the instructional support and facilitation of learning required for such a careful analysis and deep reflection. Making sense of the world through ongoing reflection and analysis is what makes us human (Arendt, 1958), it enables "conscientization" (Freire, 1972)—or an awareness of why inequality exists and what role we play in perpetuating or ending inequality. Through praxis we can realize our full human freedom and we can use praxis to generate an understanding of—and support for—political action geared at promoting social justice and equality.

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Notes

Note 1. This is a pseudonym, as are all the names used in this paper.

Note 2. Universities are increasingly marketing themselves in relation to a range of options as part of a competitive strategy including experiential learning options such as co-op programs or co-curricular community

service learning/global engagement. The rationales for offering these competitive services are related to meeting the perceived (or real) demand from their clientele: students (Sjolander, 2007).

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