Majoring in the Minor: A Closer Look at Experiential Learning

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Experiential learning is, for me, a preeminent means to accomplish goals that are fundamental to the entire educational enterprise. It is a set of strategies that structure acquisition of information, analysis of ideas, and self-reflection in order to pull people into active engagement with their world. Among these strategies are skills of observation and interpretation that require learners to take careful note and to examine themselves as processors of the details they themselves assemble into meaningful patterns, thus generating the insight, over and over again, that it is they who create the meaning they come to attach to events and to human interchange. The greater their awareness of what it is they are doing, the likelier it is that the meanings they create will confer on them the edge it takes to move forward with strength and to be part of a world they really want to be part of. In some sense, then,

these strategies help students to be actors, not objects of everyone else's acting on them. Students often say that one or another immersion experience has "transformed" them. We as educators often call this metamorphosis "empowerment."

A quotation of Marcel Proust that has been increasingly cited during this past decade (heavily by travel companies, which is ironic) is one I used some years ago when colleagues and I published the NCHC monograph *Place as Text* about experiential learning. Proust said, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." The challenge of undertaking activities that might produce and develop those new eyes has been the work of my own professional life for more than thirty years. From that work I want to pull out a few principles for us to consider.

American higher education has for more than a century considered field experience a prime vehicle for what was initially called "broadening horizons." Study abroad was an early expression of this thrust, though it was generally practiced only in elite settings where students could afford to travel to distant countries. For most of the time I am referring to here, this travel took the shape of groups in guided tours and classes that looked very much like the ones they took at home, though perhaps taught in a language other than English. Outside class there were museums, cafés, rambles, to be sure. But the norm remained "acquisition" or "collecting impressions" as a means to broaden those horizons. The emphasis was less on seeing differently than on seeing more.

By the 1990s a totally new kind of foreign study emerged with projects like the Peace Corps. Students in those programs lived and worked with foreign populations, usually those at economic levels far below what they were familiar with, eating odd food and sleeping in strange beds—or hammocks—in dark rooms. By and large the veterans of the Peace Corps I have known returned home with more knowledge, but also with different ways of seeing and a radically altered sense of what matters in human life. Extrapolating from the existential results of these kinds of immersion experiences, other projects took shape: VISTA, in which foreign territory in underserved urban areas or poor rural areas could be just another part of town, or another American town or farm community, where participants helped children learn to read, helped to build schools, introduced the printed word into the lives of entire populations. Most recently CityCorps, Teach for America, Jumpstart, and others have evolved, projects through which college students give one or more years transferring some of their learning to the daily life of those who have yet to

learn and who thus might acquire skills that permit full participation in the economic and social life of their towns, cities, and country.

There has always been, in America and in many Western countries, the expectation that another kind of immersion is expected of anyone who wants to learn about science. Both field investigation outside the classroom and laboratory experience as part of science courses—expensive to equip and implement—have been staples of high school and college curricula, even for students not intending to become laboratory scientists. These are forms of experiential learning, though often even in these domains the experience itself has been attenuated: students have been expected to replicate experiments already documented, to verify in the field what scholars have already published and the students have already read in advance of taking to those fields and labs. The anomaly of using "canned experiments" in the context of disciplines of discovery has been the subject of both anguish and critical attention in higher education since the l980s, and many changes have been initiated in scientific pedagogy to correct procedures that prevent understanding, excitement, and empowerment from occurring among students of science.

A final class of hands-on experience has for a couple of decades been increasingly evident in college curricula, namely workplace and what some call "real world" experience. These are marketed not so much to "broaden horizons" as to make students "more competitive." Placements with a social service component are seen as opportunities to "give back" and as occasions to be socially responsible. Internships, volunteer commitments, and even sometimes salaried positions used as laboratories are formal components of courses that ask students to examine connections, and disconnections, between theory and practice in the far less predictable environment of businesses, social organizations, and community programs. Presumably students acquire from this juxtaposition skills of concrete application that express or correct theory they have learned in class. But in these instances there too often is no apparatus for observation, analysis, self-reflection; no formal mechanism to promote understanding of the ramifications of experience in those practical laboratories that might **not** bear out the conclusions of theories studied on campus.

A great deal can be gained from all of the activities I have outlined here, even if they are undertaken and carried out in ways that might fall short of provoking change and deep understanding. It should be clear that I lean in the direction of constructing all laboratories as genuine experimental stations to foster consciousness of purpose and method, where students take on

the responsibility of keeping accurate lab books, noting sequences of events and who is involved in them, naming (which often means creating a personal vocabulary to describe what they think they see) the elements of what they witness, analyzing their own characterization of what they see so that, like good scientists, they can ask themselves what evidence they have provided in their lab books to support whatever analytical conclusions they have come to. Finally I want to see in those books some evidence that students have sought to identify—in the way they themselves behaved or proceeded, or in what they reported as having seen—what led them to see and record things in the way they did.

Such lab books are a means of examining not only the objects/events/interactions seen but also the eyes that looked and the sensibility that reported on what was seen. This is self-reflection—not comfort-making, maybe, but essential. Looking, in other words, is only a first step. It's an important one. Noting is a second. Both together are a preliminary exercise that my colleagues and I who practice City as Text™ strategies call "mapping." The full activity is a manifestation of observation exercises that is required for all the steps that follow from this preliminary mapping. The description, interpretation, and analysis that must come after this make possible the journey to understanding. And it is these next steps that are most often missing from what higher education has been able to mount as "experiential learning."

My argument here is that seeing, even from the viewpoint of each of several disciplines, cannot produce understanding unless an act of synthesis—of integrating disparate and sometimes contradictory information—has taken place. If in a social science class students first examine the thinking of particular scholars, who structure their analytical findings in particular frameworks, and then move out to the streets or offices to observe activities that do not conform to theory, what are they asked to do with the disparities they think they have seen? What encourages them to examine their own way of looking to see if it has produced what they think they have witnessed? The best scientists must employ these self-reflective skills all the time, though even they can occasionally be faulted for overlooking evidence that does not confirm their hypotheses. But I argue that all of us need to practice such self-reflection if we are ever to develop the "new eyes" Proust talks about.

A stunning example of the phenomenon I refer to here is the case of William Whyte's investigation of the city that he ultimately published in a monumental work called, simply, *City*. He not only came out of a generation of social scientists who had concluded that people, if given half a chance,

would avoid to their death the pressure of crowds and other people, but he himself shaped that generation and created that framework in his earlier theoretical research. Based on his conclusions, popular in the second half of the twentieth century, whole schools of urban planning, indeed whole neighborhood reconstruction efforts, evolved. Houses were torn down to make room for highways that bifurcated neighborhoods and then ended up destroying them. The planners and politicians were not sure why. Idiosyncratic and visionary thinkers like Jane Jacobs came along. For a couple of decades few took her seriously, though now she seems to have become The Urban Philosopher for a new century. She argued that people feel safer with lots of other folks around, that they seek out the presence of many—even too many—others. And her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was prophetic in that she sought to convince us all that cities work when they feel like extensions of our living room: full of objects, other people, with a constant hum, perpetual motion and exchange of energies.

Whyte, who had begun in the older school of sociology in which less is more (give them separate parks and they will play, take away all traffic and they will thrive) heard Jacobs. He undertook a long-term study with graduate students at Columbia University as his assistants. For years they broke into small teams and pursued the exact kind of mapping exercises we have been using in NCHC City as Text™ exercises since l976. What they mapped were specific areas of the built environment in New York City: the densely populated neighborhoods in Spanish Harlem, the chic business zones along Park Avenue. After many years and thousands of feet of film showing children at play and office personnel at lunch, they concluded something that surprised Whyte himself: kids congregate where there are other kids—that is, on their neighborhood streets—and play there. Even if their homemade baseball game, using a stick and a ball, interrupts the flow of traffic and threatens their lives, they prefer to play right there on their own streets (especially at intersections where traffic flow is the heaviest) than to retreat to a park unless the park itself is stuffed with others playing pick-up games.

And on the plazas outside expensive office buildings, people crowd to eat their picnic lunches—if there are others battling to find a perch in some tiny space where there are too few spots on the wall for all who want to hang out at lunch time. People rush into park areas where chairs can be moved to create new conversation clusters—something the French have known since their Revolution—rather than to "recreation areas" designed to provide ample space between bodies and keep people away from one another. They

even stop one another for a chat exactly at crowded intersections, where they block traffic and where conversation is difficult, but they stay there precisely to block and to chat.

Whyte's results were incontrovertible and, to him, shocking. He saw that to interpret his own data without fudging he needed, in effect, to scuttle a lot of his earlier decades of research and to construct an entirely new way of talking about urban space and urban renewal. He went on to include in the final publication additional observations about many places other than New York, but the impact of his extensive work where I live, in NYC, has been profound. No new tiny urban park is built without bunches of moveable chairs. There are now ordinances in place that provide "give backs" to developers such that they can build higher only if they provide public spaces where hundreds of workers can crowd to fight for sitting spots on the parapets of the plazas that provide a kind of apron in front of monolithic office buildings. Since I moved to New York it has changed remarkably and become usable and inviting in ways no one thought could happen in such a densely populated metropolitan area.

The point for me in this example is that Whyte began, very late in a well-published scholarly career, with the simple and in some ways primitive first steps that all experiential education needs to use. I know we all grow up with the admonition to "learn from experience," but we all know, probably by the time we are teenagers, that not many people do in fact learn from experience. Bigots are not bigoted because they have had a lot of experience with those they hate and want to exclude, but because no amount of experience or religious training has been able yet to dislodge from their closed minds the way they prefer to see the world. They are stuck, and cannot grow "new eyes." This behavior is extreme, though in today's world unfortunately not rare, but it exemplifies the worst effects of not being able to see old things in new ways, or maybe to see new things at all.

Why should this kind of experiential learning be a part of all education? Precisely because it helps explorers discover, it helps them develop a sense of agency, it accomplishes something advocated so eloquently by Parker Palmer: it helps students to "intersect their biography with that of the world." What we seek, all of us, are ways to reintegrate our thinking so that it does not divide us into "us and them" but instead connects us as participant observers in the same small world. We want an inventory of ways to create coherence. Out of the exclusionary cubbyholes that our disciplines appear to occupy because of how our institutions organize themselves administratively; out of the chaos

that our world presents to us in embattled countries everywhere; out of the received knowledge that shifts and changes even as we acquire it for the first time, we must arrive at modes of thinking that help us make some sense out of conflicting viewpoints and that embolden us with an organizing principle for all the disorganized information out there.

There's another reason to bother with active learning. There's a new NCHC monograph coming out soon called *Shatter the Glassy Stare*: *Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education*. As you can guess from this title, the authors refer to a perception captured only from the front of the room. The "glassy stare" phenomenon is commonplace in the academy. Students bow their heads to take notes, lift faces bravely, and too often gaze with a glazed look at the speaker. It's a phenomenon common in tour groups, seen from where the tour leader stands to tell his tale. All of us who experiment with experiential learning do so for the effect it has on deep understanding and transformative behaviors, but we also do it for the more immediate, maybe frankly selfish reason that we want desperately to shatter the glassy stare.

In *Place as Text* I wrote about mapping, analysis, and self-reflection, and I concluded that "The process turns on making maps: newcomers need to chart a passage. When explorers see themselves charting their own routes, they come to see themselves as natives in a new land. They come, in fact, to feel that they have developed new eyes."

Today I will add that explorers who see themselves as natives in a new land are engaged. In their innermost being they are involved and understand that everywhere they go, even to books they have read before or hometowns they thought they wanted to escape, they have what it takes to see more than they did before and to feel the power of being able to create their own new pathways in any setting.

This is not to say that field experience, service learning, or structured explorations should replace all other pedagogy. Quite the contrary. I would argue that it can enhance all other forms of teaching and learning by making all of it a "text" to be read, that is mapped, interpreted, analyzed, and understood reflectively. Lectures, though often too full of information for which students are not prepared, are important. They come at the wrong time. They should come after the reading, discussing, exploring. Sustained research is fundamental in higher education but could benefit from experience-based active learning, from conscious and active inquiry, as a prelude to scholarly inquiry.

Because people learn in many different ways, and because the mere accumulation of data, facts, and other people's ideas does not constitute knowledge, whatever pedagogy helps students to understand what they read, perceive how they think, organize what they hear, and see what they look at should be part of a much larger whole that allows people to incorporate multiple lenses and multiple modes into their ways of knowing at every level. To be able to make this case has been important to me, and even more important has been the opportunity to see it flourish in the minds and lives of students and teachers over the past four decades.

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