EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY: IS IT TIME TO REEXAMINE THE LIBERAL ARTS?

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During the twenty-first century, the workplace has changed more dramatically than perhaps at any other time in the history of the United States. Today, the ability to create new knowledge is quickly supplanting the importance of manufacturing goods and services. As the world continues to become more complex, more technological, and more competitive, one issue emanating from the literature on higher education is the increasing need for an educated workforce that can meet the demands of a changing economic order.

The shift in the economy from a manufacturing base to one with a knowledge foundation is having an impact on higher education in significant ways. Most important, the basic goals and purposes of higher education seem to be in flux. One constant, however, remains true today: colleges and universities can no longer afford the luxury of graduating students ill-prepared for a persistently changing workplace. Education, once an age-specific rite of passage, is now a vigorously monitored and carefully assessed investment by a variety of sources, including students and parents. These constituencies regard education largely in instrumental terms—that is, as a means of helping new graduates find a place in the economy. In fact, many students and parents view college as the “springboard to employment” and want more “job-related courses that will prepare [students] to enter … their chosen careers” (Aloi, Gardner & Lusher, 2003, p. 237).

Now, more than ever, undergraduate students are trying to make a connection between subject and content in the educational marketplace. Today, what students seem to value most is the ability to translate their undergraduate education into better employment prospects. For example, UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI),
which has been surveying freshmen every fall since 1966, notes the connection students often make between their undergraduate programs of study and future employment. UCLA’s most recent survey, conducted in 2003, revealed that almost 71% of the respondents noted the ability to get a better job as a “very important” factor in their decision to pursue a college education. Although the importance of raising a family ranked highest among the survey’s list of 21 values, at 74% the second highest priority was “succeeding financially” (Astin et al., 2003, pp. 25, 27). This was the highest point for this value in 13 years. While the importance of material gains was increasing, conversely, student desires to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” dropped again, this time to its lowest score in the history of the survey. Only 39% of the freshmen who responded viewed this as an important life goal, compared to 86% in 1967 (Astin et al., 2003, pp. 5, 7). Those institutions that fail to deliver relevance in the curriculum may find themselves facing empty classrooms.

The Quest for Relevance in Higher Education

As a result of the shift in their priorities, an increasing number of today’s students seek to concentrate their studies in subjects they consider relevant to their futures and that ideally might help them in employment opportunities upon graduation. The consequence of this focus for colleges and universities is that many academic departments across the country find themselves struggling with declining enrollments despite the fact that total number of new undergraduates has increased for the past three decades. This increase in enrollments is expected to continue further for at least the next 10 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 41).

Conversely, nationwide departments in preprofessional and technical education fields are expanding at a far faster rate than traditional academic disciplines such as the liberal arts. A look at the bachelor’s degrees awarded according to field of study across the United States confirms this trend. Although business degrees have also posted a slight decline since 2000, nonetheless, this relatively new trend in that preprofessional field does not negate the fact that
since the 1970s the overall undergraduate enrollment in the arts and sciences remains both static and downward (Astin et al., 2002, p. 7). For example, during the 1970–71 academic year, the arts and sciences accounted for 43% of the degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, while business degrees accounted for almost 10% of all degrees granted. In that same time period, only 1% of all bachelor’s degrees awarded were in the field of communications (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, p. 304).

By the new millennium, degrees awarded in arts and sciences shrank to 35% while business grew to 22% and communications hovered around 5% (Digest of Education Statistics, 2002, p. 304). Unprecedented growth in newer fields would add even more competition for the liberal arts. For example, during a five-year period ending in 2000–01, the computer science and technology fields grew by 74%. Another field with a sizeable increase was communications technologies (Digest of Education Statistics 2002, p. 203).

The raw numbers, however, uncover the most frightening trend of all. The number of degrees conferred in such areas as English, foreign languages, and mathematics actually declined from 1970 to 2001, even though the student population grew significantly. In fact, these three liberal arts areas combined conferred almost 110,000 degrees in their disciplines in 1970–71. By 2000–01, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in the same disciplines collectively hovered around 78,500, representing a 29% decline, even though the number of degrees increased by 410,000 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2002, p. 304). It is true that one reason for the decline in the liberal arts is due in part to the slow and steady shift in student priorities from general to specialized knowledge. But curiously, another explanation comes from the faculty itself. For example, some faculty members note the lack of communication with students about the importance of a liberal arts discipline both intellectually and vocationally (Mann, 1996). For most students, perceived or future success depends on professional preparation in areas such as law, medicine, or business. The fact that the liberal arts are at the roots of such disciplines is often lost on today’s career-minded youth. As a result, students are less inclined to major in the liberal arts.
Also lost in the classroom is the fact that today’s graduates, over their lifetimes, will have not one career but most likely several. In fact, 30% of current college students may eventually work in jobs that do not exist yet (Fong, 2004, p. 9). To cope with this kind of rapid change, students and educators alike need a working familiarity with a vast and growing body of knowledge that may have far more lasting value than specialized techniques and training offered in preprofessional programs. In fact, training for a specific career with specific information is too limiting for today’s work environment because such information is quickly outmoded. If a student pursues such a program of study at the undergraduate level, she or he is then insufficiently prepared for lifetime employment.

It can, therefore, be argued that the best preparation for today’s students and tomorrow’s workforce remains the liberal arts. This is because the liberal arts inherently develop the twin systems of inquiry and discovery that are necessary for critical investigation through the “habit of mind” (Fong, 2004, p. 9). It is the liberal arts mind that seeks creativity and improves upon past performance or experience in order to give new meaning to the present. In the process, there is an emphasis on the fair judging of evidence, as well as on writing and thinking with clarity. As a result, the common learning, or general education, that the liberal arts impart to each student provides skills and abilities that last a lifetime. The relevant value of a liberal arts education, then, lies in its ability to enhance men’s and women’s powers of rational analysis, independent judgment, and ability to develop mental adaptability, a characteristic needed in an era of rapid technological change. But how can educators and institutions promote the relevance of the liberal arts to their career-minded students?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) took note of the growing quest for relevance by a public that insists on the primacy of career preparation at the undergraduate level. It issued a call for curricula coherence in liberal learning as one way to address the growing number of students majoring in preprofessional fields. The AACU’s 2002 report, Greater Expectations, urges an end to the traditional and artificial distinctions that exist in the academy between liberal and practical education (National Panel Report, 2002). For example, Bobby Fong, associate president of the AACU, notes that at
Butler University, where he also serves as president, “discussions have begun with regard to how the business and pharmacy curricula could be revamped to integrate liberal study in order to better prepare graduates for their professions” (Fong, 2004, p. 9).

In its report, the AACU addresses the role of liberal education and its ability to prepare those students who select a preprofessional curriculum at the undergraduate level. For the liberal arts this means the integration of liberal studies and professional education, not their traditional divergence. Such integration in the college curriculum requires the same approach to professional studies, such as business, education, health sciences, and technologies, as to the liberal arts. The AACU concludes that any curriculum, if it is going to respond to the demands of the twenty-first century, must infuse professional learning with liberal learning (National Panel Report, 2002). But an important question remains: how will the disciplines in the liberal arts advance in this era?

Perhaps we should listen to suggestions made by observers of American undergraduate education as well as those of us involved in higher education. For example, recent national reports, while reaffirming the liberal arts tradition, criticize the passive and impersonal nature of their instructional methodologies. Those uneasy with undergraduate education in the United States call for a pedagogy that is more active and involving. Such pedagogy enables learners to take more responsibility for their educations and engages them in direct contact with the subjects of their studies.

For example, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with its long history of concern for the liberal arts in America, examined the status of undergraduate education at the dawn of the new millennium. Its report, Liberal Arts Education for a Global Society, reaffirmed the importance of the liberal arts tradition, but still criticized undergraduate education for the passive and impersonal nature of instructional methodologies. Those who served on the Carnegie Corporation’s commission to assess undergraduate education noted that one way to renew an interest in the liberal arts, and also to remove this domain from intellectual isolation, is by providing more experiential or field experiences. With an experiential component, the liberal arts professor is then able to “integrate experience and application through academic work” (Barker, 2000, pp. 6, 8).
Traditionally, for most of the liberal arts, there has been a conspicuous absence of an experiential component in most of the disciplines. This absence has been perpetuated in the academy even though instructional research demonstrates that learning activities that require learners to apply knowledge and skills to the solution of problems more often develop the higher cognitive skills than do traditional classroom methods (Stanton, 1990). It is curious to note that although no credible science program is without laboratories, no education program without student teaching, and no social work program without field exposure, the arts and humanities and most of the social sciences continue to award degrees without field components (Cassidy & Ryan, 1996, p. 17).

One explanation for the lack of field components or practical experience in the liberal arts is that for most of this century, seat time—the accumulation of academic credits through the taking and passing of courses—has served higher education well. This practice has been simple, quantifiable, and largely uncontroversial. But the credit hour model does not measure what the student can do, especially with or without the benefit of instruction. This is because the focus of the credit hour model is on processes, rather than outcomes. In other words, the focus is on what people learn rather than how learning takes place. Today, however, upon graduation, students are no longer asked, “What courses did you take and pass when you were in college?” Instead, the question has shifted to, “What do you know and what can you do?”

For liberal arts, then, there must also be a shift from processes to outcomes in order for their disciplines to successfully compete for and prepare students in the twenty-first century. To satisfy constituent demands, the liberal arts education agenda needs to develop and incorporate flexible and responsive pedagogical strategies available to meet the ever-increasing need to master, or simply understand, the skills necessary to compete in a new and perpetually changing world economy. Such a shift would allow a more active and involving learning environment, enabling learners to take responsibility for the development of their educations and engaging them in direct contact with the subjects of their studies. In the liberal arts, simply acquiring or storing knowledge is no longer enough: students must take what is learned and carefully carry that new knowledge into acts of application,
generalization, and experimentation. Without such an approach, learning remains incomplete (Cassidy & Ryan, 1996).

**One Experiential Component: The Internship**

For a growing number of those concerned with higher education, an experiential education program is one way to shift the curriculum focus from processes to outcomes. Experiential education programs enrich traditional liberal arts curricula by infusing them with a more practical learning model than the customary course of study.

Support for such programs comes from several sources and has been building for a number of years. For example, a study conducted during the 1980s by the National Endowment for the Humanities indicated widespread acceptance and understanding by faculty of internships and field studies as integral parts of liberal arts education (Stanton, 1990). Additionally, in the 1990s when parents, students, and instructors were surveyed as to how the liberal arts could be made more effective, the principal response from all three groups was that undergraduate institutions should offer more internship opportunities (Reed, 1996). For those seeking relevance in their educations, the application of learning in an experiential setting becomes a very powerful tool.

Experiential learning as a formal part of college and university curricula extends across a broad spectrum of subject areas and programs. For instance, experiential learning activities can include cooperative education, practicum experiences, and classroom-based, hands-on laboratory activities (Barker, 2000). Although field-based education can take many forms, the focus here is on credit-bearing field experiences, which are intensive, closely monitored, and take place over a period of many weeks. Such a form of experiential learning is universally referred to as “the internship.” This kind of experiences outside the academy requires that the students use their prior learning and apply their academically acquired knowledge to a professional setting. Those opportunities made available to students through internship experiences provide the relevance needed in the liberal arts.
The goal of this study, then, is to broaden the discussion amongst those concerned about higher education regarding the importance of including appropriate experiential courses in the traditional liberal arts program of study. One way to facilitate such is to begin by addressing three areas of concern for faculty and administrators alike. The first concern addresses the foundation of teaching experience in the liberal arts. By borrowing from several education theorists, a method of inquiry for the educator new to experiential education begins to emerge. The discussion in the next section centers on the changing role of the liberal arts educator in the classroom once a field component becomes the focus of coursework. Finally, in order to increase experiential opportunities for students, those involved in educational decision-making in liberal arts institutions must remember that any experiential method of learning is a complementary and not competing part of the undergraduate program of study.

Making Sense of Experiential Education: A Critical Pedagogy in the Liberal Arts

Teaching experience in the liberal arts is complex. For the educator trying to develop a critical pedagogy for the liberal arts internship, it is essential to understand that the factor distinguishing the internship from other work experience or community service is the intentional learning agenda that the student brings to her or his work (Cassidy & Ryan, 1996). Thus, experiential education is not just experiential learning, but a philosophy of education based upon the primacy of experience in the learning process.

John Dewey recognized the complexity involved in experiential learning. In his argument for moving the learning experience outside the classroom walls, Dewey emphasized that the quality of the experience was as important as the experience itself (Dewey, 1963). That is, it was not simply experience, but rich and structured experiences, to which students were to be exposed, and upon which they would recapture the experience and learn. Just as Dewey believed that every experience was valuable, it is important to note that not all experiential programs are valuable experiences in the strict sense of their being connected to student learning. In fact, it is important to
note that the most generous misinterpretation of Dewey equates education and experience, from which it is inferred that the experience, in and of itself, becomes educative (Cassidy & Ryan, 1996). Thus, using this logic, any series of experiences—the more direct and dynamic the better—can be substituted for formal schooling.

On the contrary, Dewey, as well as others, drew a clear distinction between valuable educational experiences and “experiences that are ‘non-educative’ or ‘miseducative’” (Conrad & Hedin, 1990, p. 127). Both Dewey and education theorist David Kolb, also noted for his work in experiential learning, maintain that an important goal of the experiential program is to learn how to transform experience into knowledge, and then use this knowledge for individual and collective development (Kolb, 1984).

James Coleman takes a slightly different approach than Dewey as well as Kolb. He prefers to examine what he calls the “traditional form of learning,” rather than traditional education and the experiential setting (Sims & Sims, 1995, p. 2). Coleman’s approach rests on the argument that students undergo a process of information assimilation in what he calls the traditional form of learning. Such learning consists of receiving, assimilating and organizing, applying, and finally transferring information into action. He compares this with experiential ends of receiving information through the processing of that action. To achieve this end there must be effective management of the learning process by faculties in institutions of higher education requiring the creation of environments that facilitate a productive learning climate (Sims & Sims, 1995, p. 2).

For the educator, then, any experience must first be processed through an intentional learning format and transformed into working, useable knowledge. Students come to a better understanding of the field experience by combining the theoretical aspects learned in classrooms with the practical experience encountered in the internship. To that end, experiential students should actively engage in a rigorous, ongoing incorporation of previous course material while at the same time continuing their development and refinement of both critical thinking and analytical skills. In turn, the students can make a connection between their traditional curriculum and accomplishments outside the classroom because of the fundamental requirements of experiential learning. Such requirements for the learner include taking
initiative, making decisions, and being accountable for results, achievable by actively posing questions, investigating, experimenting, solving problems, assuming responsibility, and integrating previously developed knowledge. These requirements overlap significantly with liberal arts skills learned in the classroom: namely, applying and evaluating information, systematically defining a problem, and predicting future trends and patterns (Breen & Whitaker, 1982).

Therefore, the more the student views the internship as an educational experience designed to augment traditional academic work, the more she or he will gain from it and other aspects of the nonexperiential curriculum before and after the internship. For the student engaged in experiential learning, any program design must inherently seek to bring together past and current academic study with practical experience and combine the theoretically rich aspects learned in English, history, and other classrooms with the practical experience encountered in the internship. By the conclusion of the internship, the student can use the experience to provide examples of theory validity or to argue exceptions to a theory. Thus, both reflection and the transfer of knowledge are essential and integral components of any academically successful program.

The Role of the Liberal Arts Educator in the Experiential Classroom

It goes without saying that in any forum, learning may not take place if teaching is not structured to assist learning. Thus, the experiential educator must ensure that the environment is made ready for learning while at the same time encouraging students to recognize and focus on the transference of learning from the classroom to the professional environment (Hartman, 1995, p. 36). What, then, are the educator’s primary roles in such an environment?

In the experiential setting, students will naturally discover an understanding of organizational structures and protocol within a professional working environment. The educator then assumes the role of facilitator as well as instructor, whose pedagogical responsibilities include selecting suitable experiences for further classroom inquiry and independent study. Other tasks include setting limits,
guiding reflection, and providing the necessary information for a successful academic plan. When overseen and coupled with the appropriate coursework, the internship can and does provide students with a chance to connect coursework to professional work experience. From this connection not only does something as practical as understanding organizational structures, for example, emerge, but so too does the opportunity for the student to assume responsibility for his or her intellectual and professional development.

At the end of this process, the educator’s role is changed from that of a lecturer to that of a professor/facilitator, whose task it is to help students to make sense of their educational experiences. As a result, the educator no longer has sole responsibility for enlightening, educating, and motivating students through a lecture. That responsibility is then shared with students as they become more actively involved in their learning. The educator now serves as a catalyst, questioning and interacting with students. Through this interaction students can help to determine what activities will best help them to learn at the internship site. Experiential programs may represent one of the few paths to creating a critical pedagogy—a form of discourse in which teachers and students conduct an unfettered investigation of social institutions, power relationships, and value commitments.

But the most important role in the experiential setting for the faculty remains the instructional one. Therefore, learning activities, however chaotic they may be in the professional setting or learning environment, should not necessarily remain haphazard. In any experiential education program, it is important to remember that most critical learning still takes place in the classroom. To that end, a successful experiential education program of study must contain four essential elements in its academic plan: the vision, which is essentially the goals of the internship; the progress, or design of the internship; interaction between the student and the professor; and finally, the outcomes or acquired knowledge drawn directly from the experiential setting. Taken together, these four elements help the student express the most fundamental goals of a liberal learning: that is, an interdisciplinary, analytical process of gaining knowledge by engaging in meaningful experiences and the experience of others. When students analyze their internship-related experiences in terms of their classroom readings and reflect on both theoretical assumptions and
historical issues, they make connections among their majors, their internships, and their vocations.

This connecting activity, in turn, is one way to provide the relevance sought by both parents and students today in the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum by actively involving students in the learning process. Each participant has a personal investment in his or her acquisition of knowledge and skills as he or she constructs value from direct experience. That motivation frequently transfers back to the traditional classroom as students recognize the relevance of and need for theoretical backgrounds in the professional setting. For example, the need to write effectively becomes important when the internship requires a report or proposal for a community organization. Another example occurs when there is a need for the student to possess a theoretical understanding of human relations as they relate to current issues.

Thus, the more the student views the internship as an educational experience designed to augment traditional academic work, the more she or he will gain from it and other aspects of the nonexperiential curriculum before and after the internship. Properly matched and instituted, the internship then becomes an essential component of any undergraduate curriculum, because it does more than acquaint students with the past or prepare them for the future. Instead, the internship demonstrates that learning is a value-laden and lifelong process where the goal is not merely market growth or share, but the free exchange of knowledge and ideas. With new integrative efforts in established curricula, we may establish a model of undergraduate education that promotes or can combat the almost automatic disconnect students perceive between liberal arts learning in the classroom and professional life.

The Experiential Course: A Complimentary, not Competing, Course

The question for some, then, becomes what happens to the perceived value of classroom instruction as a result of the inclusion or expansion of experiential education programs. Field experiences should complement the traditional liberal arts curriculum; they are not a
substitute for it. Every effort must be made to see that field experience is a coherent part of a student’s academic plan rather than an isolated episode. Therefore, there must be an appropriate emphasis on primary experience without losing sight of the possibilities of improving secondhand experience as well (Reed, 1996, p. 8).

In its role as a complimentary educational opportunity for liberal arts students, the experiential learning and its credit-worthiness needs further discussion. That is, the traditional liberal arts curriculum places an emphasis on activities to which time is devoted to learning through secondhand experience (Reed, 1996, p. 4). In the process, students limit their opportunities from primary experience. It is important for educators to fight this tendency to degrade primary experience and to replace it with restricted secondhand experience.

One way to accomplish this objective is to make field experiences just as worthy of credit as classroom experience. Urban Whitaker, noted for his scholarly work in experiential learning, found that in order to be credit-worthy, field based experiences must meet five standards. First, credit should be awarded only for learning and not for experience. Second, college credit should be awarded only for college-level learning; while third, credit awarded must be only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practice. He also argues that fourth, appropriate subject matter and academic experts must determine the competence levels of credit awards. Finally, Whitaker argues that credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted (Whitaker, 1989).

Adding prerequisites for a field-based course would achieve Whitaker’s objectives. Most experiential courses, often taken in the student’s junior or senior year, should require a previous program of study before scheduling the internship. Much as one studies a foreign language before undertaking study abroad, so one also prepares for an internship in a state legislator’s office by coursework in economics, political science, and history. A theoretical understanding of the process in which he or she is involved makes the student a more effective participant. In fact, by rooting the experiential program of learning in previous class experience, a liberal arts curriculum can then create methods of inquiry and experience for students that complement, rather than compete with, the traditional components of
such a curriculum. Such a design is a complementary component because it is part of the same learning process, rather than a different curriculum.

**Controversies and Challenges for Experiential Learning**

Despite the changing nature of the economy and its net effect on students, some educators argue that a liberal arts education is not a vocational education and, hence, concerns of the workplace have no place in the liberal arts classroom (Cantor, 1995). In fact, some educators find the concept of experiential education to be gimmicky and faddish. Some argue that it is more concerned with technique and process than content and substance; others find the growth a disturbing vocational trend in American education (Kolb, 1984).

At the same time, however, academics, especially those in the liberal arts, value abstract knowledge, which is then divided into identifiable categories known as disciplines. Each discipline has its own problems, methods, and customs. As a result, the departmental structure of the university reflects that division of knowledge into various realms. The problem for both the student and the university involved in experiential education is that the kinds of trials and tribulations that many students encounter in the field never seem to fit neatly into disciplinary categories.

Moreover, many faculty members and administrators are not sure how an institution might provide experiential learning opportunities and traditional curricula at the same time. That is, while the liberal arts have been legitimately characterized as being theoretically rich, other disciplines are frequently characterized as too skills-based and theoretically weak. For example, in the communications discipline, particularly for those students studying broadcasting and television production, the experiential component is to some extent built into the curriculum itself. As a result, there is an abundance of “doing.” In short, there is too much practice and not enough theory, and thus a neglect of the “habit of mind” so lauded by liberal arts educators. The need, therefore, is to design curricula where theory and practice combine to fulfill both the academic and experiential needs of the student.
Finally, the greatest challenge facing many programs that seek to adopt experiential components is that of engaging faculty. For example, many tenured faculty members may be comfortable with their current teaching methods and do not have the time, and in some cases the interest, to try new and perhaps risky strategies in their classes. At the same time, untenured faculty may find it difficult getting the professional support necessary for them to engage in experimental teaching methods. Additionally, many new faculty do not have the luxury of diverting their time away from research demands to design an effective experiential class. Others may find the time commitment of creating and conducting experiential courses too burdensome, while most universities provide little incentive and even less funding to compensate faculty for their extra time and efforts. Last, there is an information and awareness issue: some faculties simply do not know much about experiential education (Experiential Education Initiative, 1995).

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, the quest for institutions of higher education then becomes one of finding the golden mean between the preparation of careers and the cultivation of values. To achieve this golden mean, all those involved must take note of a school’s culture, which is shaped by many factors, including course offerings and instructional methods, as well as the opportunities produced by both. Even further, any given institutional decision is influenced by the institution’s history, its academic standing, its sense of purpose, and the relationship existing between research and teaching as the university perceives it. All these factors add to an institution’s distinctiveness. Like everything else, then, experiential programs will reflect those institutional characteristics and add to the school’s distinctiveness.

When students are presented with an educational opportunity that fosters growth and prepares their minds for imaginative inquiry, in the words of J. P. Guildford, we are then teaching “understandings or intellectual conceptualizations, with logical interrelationships and organizations,” and as a result, “society will flourish with skilled and imaginative problem solvers” (Sennett, 2004, p. 42).
Notes

1. National Center for Education Statistics, Educational Digest, p. 304. “Table 252. Bachelor’s degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by discipline division: 1970–71 to 2000–01.” (Note: the data has been adjusted by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Statistics, so that the figures available for the new Classification of Instructional Programs, initiated in 1991–92, for earlier years have been reclassified when necessary to make them conform to the new taxonomy.)

References


