

# Experientially Learning and Teaching in a Student-Directed Classroom

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## Abstract

There exists a relatively coherent body of research relevant to problem-based and transformational learning but too few studies that have empirically explored the many anecdotal claims of the attributes of experiential, student-directed pedagogy. The purpose of this present study was to explore students' and professor experiences with/in a student-directed experiential education elective course. What successes and challenges do students and the professor experience and how? What surprises, new learnings, and pedagogical risks ensue? The primary results include (a) Student Responsibility and Accountability, (b) Structure, (3) Role of the Professor, (4) Experiences With Self-Study Participation, and 5) Informing and Transforming Practice. These results and the review of literature add to the body of knowledge relevant to "doing" student-directed experiential education and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in the postsecondary classroom.

## Keywords

student-directed pedagogy, postsecondary experiential education, scholarship of teaching and learning

## Introduction

Experiential learning is a "buzz term" that conveys images of "hands on" learning activities, out-of-classroom educational experiences, and experimentation. In reference to university life, experiential learning often applies to service-learning initiatives, field trips, and/or internships. Corollary terms to experiential learning include problem-based learning, project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, student-directed learning, and active

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learning, among others. Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) suggest that these seemingly different strategies share important underlying characteristics, including complimentary components of a broader approach to classroom instruction called transformational learning. There exists a relatively coherent body of research relevant to these corollary teaching and learning praxes. These praxes are learner-, instructional-, and curricular-centered ones that empower both students and teachers to conduct research, integrate theory and practice, and apply knowledge and skills (Walker, Leary, Hmelo-Silver, & Ertmer, 2015). With the above in mind and with the many anecdotal claims that experiential educators value student-centered and transformational learning with too few studies that have empirically explored this (Ossa Parra, Gutiérrez, & Aldana, 2014), the purpose of this present study was to explore students' and professor experiences with/in a student-directed experiential education elective course. What successes and challenges do students and the professor experience and how? What surprises, new learnings, and pedagogical risks ensue? The focus of this article is to present findings from our experiences with the course. The sections that follow include Literature Review, Method, Results, and Discussion.

## Literature Review

This review of relevant literature will provide a conceptual framework to inform the study purpose. This literature review includes sections on traditional and alternative pedagogies, transformative pedagogy, experiential education, and the relationship between theory and practice.

### *Traditional and Nonformal (Alternative) Pedagogies*

Many traditional models of education rely on transmission as the primary approach to delivering knowledge. The liberatory pedagogue, Paulo Freire (1970) refers to this as the banking model of education whereby the teacher deposits knowledge into the open repositories of students' minds. Students' ability to memorize and recite the deposited information is the primary indicator of knowledge acquisition and academic success, according to these traditional models. The teacher serves as the sole disciplinarian and decision-maker regarding course content, assessments, and teaching methods (Freire, 1970). The Progressivist John Dewey (1938) asserts that traditional methods of teaching and classroom structures are often decontextualized from students' lived experiences, making the knowledge obtained in schools irrelevant to their lives. Noting that students' experiences in the context of traditional schooling are largely uninspiring and fail to actively engage students in their education, Dewey (1938) notes that many students lose the impetus to learn.

Freire (1970) proposes an alternative to these more traditional methods, which he conveys as a liberatory one, calling it a problem-posing model of education. This educational model places value on the importance of student experience and voice and represents a dialogical method of teaching and learning whereby the student and the teacher are cocreating course design, content, and pedagogical approach as well as

sharing responsibility (Breunig, 2011a). Nonformal educational settings and nontraditional pedagogies, such as the one proposed by Freire, offer alternative models of education. Nonformal education embeds learning content in activities across an array of settings providing wide latitude for self-direction and interpretation on the part of learners (Seaman, Beightol, Shirilla, & Crawford, 2010). Nonformal settings and approaches may consist of both out-of-classroom learning experiences but may also include the classroom as a setting for alternative approaches and modes of teaching and learning to be enacted. Several empirical studies indicate that students engaged in nonformal, transformational learning “demonstrate more learning, better conceptual understanding, superior class attendance, greater persistence, and increased engagement when collaborative or interactive teaching methods are used compared to when traditional lecturing is employed” (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012).

### *Transformative Pedagogy*

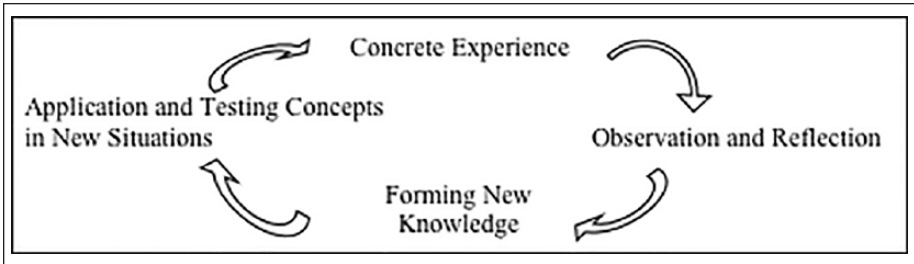
According to Cranton (2011), transformative pedagogy shifts the way we make meaning—moving from a simplistic reliance on authority through to more complex ways of knowing. Faculty working within this paradigm critically question concrete aspects of their practice in a rational and cognitive way asking such questions as, “How can I better facilitate instruction?” “How can I encourage students to be actively engaged in their learning?” “How can I improve my own practice?” They may question and challenge institutional and social norms and expectations related to their practice, including, “Why do course outlines have to be prepared and submitted in advance of meeting the students?” “Why should I be the one to solely determine assignments, due dates, and assessments?” These questions are examples of social emancipatory approaches to transformative learning and ideology critique (Cranton, 2011). Brookfield (1990) observes that academics should not exclusively self-define as discipline-experts but should also self-identify in relation to the common purpose of “helping students shape the world they inhabit” (p. 17).

It is this perspective and view of transformative learning that informs the present study and aligns with experiential education theory.

### *Experiential Education*

Given this study’s focus on the transformative potential of experiential education, this section will provide a more in depth overview of this specific alternative pedagogy. Central to any definition of experiential learning and education is the distinction between these terms. Experiential learning is a teaching method that involves active experimentation. Experiential education implies that there is an intended teleological aim toward which the experiential learning process is directed (Breunig, 2008). John Dewey (1938) distinguishes this in *Experience and Education*, in talking about the difference between primary or secondary experience. Primary experiences are incidental activities or engagements. Secondary experiences undergo a process of regulated reflective inquiry—those that are integrated with past experiences and in consideration of future ones (the experiential continuum, Dewey, 1938), in a teleological (purposeful) manner.

David Kolb (2014) describes that learning through and from experience occurs by (a) engaging concrete experience with (b) observation and reflection (c) that forms new knowledge and (d) applying and testing those concepts in new situations (see Figure 1 below).



**Figure 1.** The experiential learning cycle.

Source: Kolb (1984).

David Kolb (2014) suggests that many educators refer to the term *experiential learning* as “hands on” exercises and games that involve students in the learning process (primary experience). An internship or community-based experience may be just that but it also may be more, linking abstract, isolated experiences to scholarly theories. From this perspective, experiential education can be a “useful framework for learning-centred educational innovation, including instructional design, curriculum development, and life-long learning” (Kolb, 2014, p. xxv).

### *The Relationship Between Theory and Practice*

In reflecting further on experiential education classroom practices, Buck and Akerson (2016) and Estes (2004) (among others) encourage educators to examine the incongruence between espoused values and values in practice within learning environments, claiming that experiential educators often teach about student-centred learning theories while remaining mostly teacher-centered themselves. This can create a disconnection between experiential theory and classroom practice; for instance, some educators who advocate for reflective, experiential education in theory may in fact use teaching strategies that are teacher-centered and that do not allow adequate time for student reflection (Breunig, 2008).

Roberts (2012) calls for renewing the greater purpose of experiential education in schools, arguing that much of what passes as experiential education on university campuses today fails to address Dewey’s (1938) caution against the reduction of experience just for experience’s sake. Sakofs (2001) impels educators to engage students in only those experiential activities that are intentional, avoiding “handing out” these activities like candy. While sweet and desirable, “experiential candy” lacks substance and meaning. Rose and Paisley (2012) highlight the continuous need to “trouble educational practices, including those that take place in experiential” classrooms as even these spaces “remain sites of power, privilege, and oppression” (p. 142).

This study in large part is intended to heed these encouragements that student-directed experiential pedagogy needs to be further investigated and problematized.

## **Method**

This section will provide an overview of the study's theoretical framework, the methodology, study sites and participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis. As previously mentioned, the study purpose was to explore students' and professor experiences with/in a student-directed experiential education elective course. What successes and challenges do students and the professor experience and how? What surprises, new learnings, and pedagogical risks ensue?

### *Theoretical Framework*

The above literature review with its focus on alternative pedagogy, transformational learning, experiential education, and the theory/practice relationship helps to frame the study's purpose. In addition to that, this present study is informed by the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature. The SoTL involves scholarly thought and action about the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning at the postsecondary level (Boyer, 1990). Boyer first described SoTL as consisting of four elements: teaching, discovery, integration, and application. SoTL involves the systematic study of teaching and learning to advance understanding, improve practices, and build collective knowledge. It consists of a professor empirically investigating course design, course content, pedagogical approach, assignments and assessments, the classroom space, authority and agency (among other aspects of the course) to more fully understand, critique, and (re)consider classroom praxes (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011). SoTL involves the study of both course content and pedagogic approach including the efficacy of problem-based learning, project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, student-directed learning, experiential education, and active learning as transformative pedagogies. As mentioned above, faculty working within this theoretical paradigm critically question and challenge institutional and social norms and expectations related to their practice.

### *Methodology*

SoTL research is often conducted using a qualitative methodology, which explores individuals' understandings of their experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This study adopted a specific qualitative approach for this exploration, using self-study as the guiding methodology. Self-study research involves rigorous, critical inquiry into how teaching and learning is formed and informed by teaching practices and course content (Buck & Akerson, 2016). Self-study is practical inquiry that explores the relationship between theory and practice. Self-study has been described as a way to improve teaching practices and develop professionally (Carde & Orgnero, 2013). As mentioned above, Dewey and Freire were teacher inquirers (Buck & Akerson, 2016), and thus this methodological

approach is not new to the field of pedagogy. Despite that, self-study research of classrooms persists as a method to more fully learn about and improve teaching praxes. Berry and Russell (2013) suggest that self-study researchers seek to make explicit their beliefs, intentions, and actions, identifying discrepancies and striving to enhance the levels of congruence in their practice. Self-study aligns with transformative pedagogies as it both challenges assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning and includes the (re) shaping and cocreation of pedagogical praxes that emerge from the inquiry (Elliott-Johns & Tidwell, 2013) and is thus fitting for this present study.

### *Study Sites and Participants*

The study “sites” consisted of two fourth-year, 12-week (semester long) experiential education elective courses at a mid-sized Canadian University (2012 and 2014). The fourth-year experiential education course is student-directed. We meet “formally” for 3 hours each week but adopt a semistructured approach to learning, with the professor establishing some initial structure and course content and students coestablishing course assessments, expectations, and content for much of the semester. One preestablished course component is that each year, students participate in a community/academic project, which consists of working alongside school teachers, parents, and elementary students to codesign and install an outdoor classroom. This project involved multiple site visits and the actual construction of the outdoor classroom in the schoolyard. Simultaneous to project installation, students in the experiential education course observed and related with the students and school teachers to then write Ministry of Education–aligned outdoor/environmental–focused curriculum for the teachers’ use.

The experiential education elective course students and instructor otherwise coestablished the remaining course content and relevant assessments. This is done by applying Boomer, Lester, Onore, and Cook’s (1992) method of curriculum negotiation in which students (and the teacher) determine what students already know about a given topic, what they want to find out, how they will find it out, and how they will assess their accomplishments. The results of this process are varied each semester but often include a combination of readings (i.e., John Dewey’s, 1938, *Experience and Education*; Derick Jensen’s, 2004, *Walking on Water*) and relevant writing assignments and experiences that critically consider teaching and learning from counterhegemonic (questioning the status quo) perspectives.

Study participants from the 2012 cohort consisted of 18 students, 11 female and 7 male (20–25 years old). The 2014 cohort comprised of 14 students (7 males and 7 females of the same age range). The research project underwent university Research Ethics Board (REB) review.

### *Data Collection*

Congruent with self-study, I used both journals and focus group sessions to collect data. According to Chabon and Lee-Wilkerson (2006), a journal is both a diary and a log in that it blends personal reflections, accounts of events, and descriptions of

experiences. Journaling is a useful tool to document specific experiences in natural contexts and feelings associated with those experiences (Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012; Smith & Hunt, 1997). In light of the theoretical framework, the study methodology, and my own “critical” pedagogical praxis, I adopted Stephen Brookfield’s “Critical Incident Questionnaire” to formulate the journal script (Brookfield, 1995). This framework has been used in several studies (Glowacki-Dudka & Barnett, 2007; Phalen, 2012) and seeks to capture the “vivid happenings” that occur in learning experiences (Keefer, 2009). Students (and I) responded to the questionnaire items and were prompted to capture thoughts and new learnings related to each week’s class experiences, all within 24 hr postclass.

Because meanings and answers arising from focus group interviews are socially rather than individually constructed (Berg & Lune, 2014), the focus group session from this study was designed with the intent to provide students (and myself) with a forum to collectively reflect upon and articulate our lived experiences with the student-directed course. The focus group session occurred 2 weeks after the end of each semester. Each session (2012 and 2014) lasted 1.5 hr and was audiotaped. Students self-assigned pseudonyms. The focus group session was semistructured allowing room for general sharing and for concerns to arise while also consisting of preestablished questions about course experiences, successes, and challenges. Students were also asked to answer the question, “What constitutes course content?” and to reflect upon “surprises,” “new learnings,” and “applications.” Given the semistructured and collective/reflective foci of this focus group session, I believe that the resultant responses were particularly generative and sapient (Morgan, 2001).

### *Data Analysis*

The focus group session was transcribed and journal entries and focus group reports were analyzed inductively. An analysis of self-study data adopts an inductive and emergent strategy with a focus on understanding the meaning of participant descriptions (Buck & Akerson, 2016). I thus read through the transcriptions in the spirit that Berg and Lune (2014) suggest—as a passport to listening to the words of the text and understanding better the perspective(s) of the producer of these words. Through this inductive process, I identified “significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 82).

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

### **Results**

The results that follow include sections on the following primary themes: (a) Student Responsibility and Accountability, (b) Structure, (c) Role of the Professor, (d)



Experiences With Self-Study Participation, and (5) Informing and Transforming Practice. These results include select quotes and paraphrases to illuminate participant reports.

### *Student Responsibility and Accountability*

Many students from both cohorts both wrote about (in their journals) and commented (during the focus group session) that the professor's engagement and passion with the course and schoolyard project and the "real life" commitment of the service-learning project design and installation impelled them to be more accountable.

Natasha (F, 2014) commented in her journal that the class is so engaging for everyone and it leaves me feeling excited, nervous, anxious, full of ideas and committed to the group. "I feel as though I hold power and some ability to make a difference [in this class]." Donatello (M, 2012) remarked, "I think we successfully, kind of proved that we wanted to be here. And proved like, some stereotypes of students wrong. So we didn't place any [grade] value on attendance but yet we all showed up."

Contrastingly, Victoria (F, 2014) highlighted the responsibilities that students neglected stating, "It is very displeasing hearing your peers not doing the readings." Jack (M, 2012) commented,

As students right now we don't like when we have to be the leader and we have to take charge, because then there's no moment when we can be like this isn't my fault. We like someone that we can blame . . . this is a bad teacher, this is a bad group leader, this is a bad prime minister, this is a bad [school] president . . .

Josh (M, 2012) talked about how in this experiential education course, students couldn't negate responsibility.

A number of students identified that certain students dominated and spoke too much. Josh (M, 2012) wrote in his journal that people "don't 'share the mic' and I find it distracting when we are conversing [as a class]." Naomi (F, 2012) expressed that the group liaisons were not really liaising at all, stating, "Our group leader never led, except for creating a Facebook group." Jonathan (M, 2014) wrote that he and his classmates were not ready to self-regulate and to have control over "our own assessments and marks." Vicky (F, 2014) summarized, "we didn't always live up to our own expectations."

### *Structure (Minimum and Necessary?)*

Almost every student in both cohorts talked about the value of the course but wished there had been more student-directed pedagogy prior to their fourth-year university experience. Many of them talked about having a prerequisite or other preparation prior to being "thrown into the deep end" of experiential education. Zelda (F, 2012) shared "the timing was off and I really wasn't prepared for it [experiential approach]; I would have preferred this type of learning environment be introduced maybe at some point in



third year or something.” This same sentiment was affirmed by many students. Several students also expressed their belief that the class size should be smaller, stating the challenges of “doing” student-directed experiential pedagogy with 20 + students. Tad (M, 2012) emphasized, “I think because it was new for all of us, that we were all very overwhelmed and unsure of it as well. Like the blind leading the blind.”

Marie (F, 2012) summarized that “the syllabus at first was very confusing because for all our other classes, we are used to having something very structured laid out in front of us, with no say in the matter.” Josh (M, 2012) commented, “Creating content for a university course as a student is an extreme oddity. I wasn’t sure if Robin Williams would show up and tell us to rip the first pages from Dewey’s *Experience and Education*.” He went on to say, “This type of course seems to demand respect, attention, and listening.”

Nicole (F, 2014) reported, “I feel like we stretched so far out that like at some points we needed to be reeled back in with added structure.” Dawn (F, 2012) wrote in her journal, “The course often gives me a bit of whiplash in the structure. We often go from full liberation to a complete lack of student involvement.” Jonathan (F, 2014) wrote in his journal, “The freedom is almost stressful.” Leslie (F, 2014) wrote in her journal that one of the experiential activities (the group juggle) was a metaphor for the structure of the class and life in general: “It shows that there is always a lot to juggle and that you may ‘drop the ball’ on occasion but you can recover and pick it up again.”

### *Role of Professor*

Most students shared comments about the role of the professor. “The professor’s entire attitude affirmed that I wanted to be in the class,” according to Marie (F, 2012). Mary Beth (F, 2012) shared, “Although it was a student-instructed class, I found the days that there was no teacher, present that, the class was kind of in shambles.” MM (F, 2012) responded to her (in the focus group session) stating, “Yeah, but it was all a part of the learning experience.” Sara from the 2014 cohort stated, “This is personal for me and how I learn but I need a teacher to lecture what I’ve just read.” “Dewey would have been inaccessible without your guiding questions and clarification, [professor’s name]” (Journal Entry from Thomas, 2014). “I can’t help but wonder what chaos would occur if [professor] wasn’t there” (Josh, 2012).

Jonathan (F, 2014) wrote in his journal that “our group should have met with Mary to discuss the issue of academic/social loafing,” asking her to help facilitate our group to encourage more equanimous contributions. “There were only a few people actually contributing to the schoolyard project plan.” “I am actually surprised that she did not take back control of the marks” because maybe she should have to help manage some of the lax students. I (professor) noted in my journal and in the focus group session (2012 and 2014) that I was uncertain about what to do with the varied levels of student participation and course uncertainties as it felt “risky” either way to me, whether to just let it go and see what evolved or to reassert my control (and when?).

Natasha (F, 2014) wrote how refreshing it is to “have a prof who has your best interests in mind and isn’t just teaching to say they teach.” Marie (F, 2012) talked

about how amazing it is to be in a course when the “prof actually knows you by name and makes an effort to get to know her students” at the beginning of the semester but at the end, declared, that the prof is a bit harsh with her criticism as she is clearly disappointed in us—but it is unclear “what she expected—because it is such an unstructured course.” Josh (M, 2012) wrote in his journal, “[professor] knows how to connect with people . . . being light and funny one moment, then deep and critical the next. . . . I am impressed with her style.”

On a day when I was absent from class, June (F, 2012) wrote,

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

Erick (M, 2012) recalled, “[professor’s name], while you pushed us to succeed ourselves, we’d be kidding ourselves if we thought we’d be anywhere close to this point [of project completion] without you.” Heather (F, 2012) expressed confusion over what she described as the push/pull authority of the professor. “Sometimes [professor’s name] was too involved at the wrong time and other times she was involved too little.” Regarding my own role, I commented in my journal:

I kept trying different ways of talking, like I’m going to be a little more assertive today, uh or like I’m just going to be sort of like, joke-y, or what can I do to get them to set a timeline? I was like playing around with that responsibility piece and that structure piece, I think a lot of the semester, in my own mind. . . . like, oh, I probably should have stepped in. What would stepping in have done? Would I then have stay in once I stepped in? So it’s an interesting thing to play with.

### *Experiences With Self-Study Participation*

Two thirds of the students from both cohort years reported that participating in the study and engaging in structured reflection was impactful. Students reported both positive and negative experiences with reflective journaling as a component of the study and course. According to Mac (F, 2012), “the biggest success for me came from journaling after classes and reflecting came in the form of personal growth or self-awareness” and Grant (M, 2012) added to this in the focus group session, saying, “I found journaling very valuable for myself. Just learning and writing down all my ideas and all the emotions that I felt during the day.” Mac concluded, “I’ll keep the journal to direct me after the experience.”

Conversely, Baker (M, 2012) started his journal with the following, “Journaling . . . again?” making reference to the number of courses that include journals as a required course component. Another student wrote, “I am meeting with [professor’s name] to drop out of the study given I am behind in journaling” and my own journals in both years, read, “I am falling behind with journaling and need to be more vigilant.”

Josh (M, 2012) in his journal wrote, “I forgot to write this week, having only journaled the day before the next class the previous week. Ugh!” Other students expressed

the above-and-beyond time commitment of the course mid-late semester, expressing waning enthusiasm. One student (M, 2014) wrote,

I do really like the class idea on paper. It just hasn't flown the way I wished. More Wright Brothers 1903 and not enough 2014 Boeing 787 Dreamline. It took off but not really a full flight. Would have been neat to try this with 10 students only.

### *Informing and Transforming Practice*

Almost all the students talked about the impact that the experiential approach will have on their future teaching and leadership. Most students from both cohorts expressed new learnings about themselves as individuals, talking about how the course will impact their future engagements with others, including being more self-aware about their own learning style alongside an increased understanding of the multiplicity of learning styles. Andrew (M, 2014) concluded,

I think the content was very mind opening like it brought a lot of new ideas and opinions into my head that I hadn't thought about before and then reading about Dewey, and then actually putting experiential education into actual practice and seeing it first hand how it worked was really eye opening.

Bobbi (F, 2014) commented, "I think it's like gonna really transfer into our lives; it's really going to help us in future years that we now know what it's like to be the boss, the leader, and be part of a group." Jonathan (M, 2014) concluded, "This class has instilled concepts and a way of thinking and living that I hope to live and introduce to my children in the future," adding "As a landscaper, I am going to pursue a business opportunity to create experiential classrooms for the Niagara region." Sammy (F, 2014) articulated,

I took the principles I learned from this class and used [Dewey's] *Education and Experience* as my format and basis for a presentation [in another class]. I can connect almost everything to *Experience and Education* and the words that Dewey was writing. I'm gonna' use that.

### *Concluding Remarks*

While not every student journal entry and focus group report could be included here, the above quotes and paraphrases highlight the primary themes that emerged out of analysis. These results and those themes provide the substructure for the Discussion that follows.

## **Discussion**

This section will be organized around the primary result themes and will include (re) integration of relevant literature to more fully consider the ways in which these study reports build upon the body of knowledge relevant to "doing" student-directed

experiential education in the postsecondary classroom. This Discussion merges the themed results into three primary sections given the analogous reports relevant to certain themes. These three sections include (a) Student Responsibility and Accountability and Self-Study Participation, (b) Structure and Role of the Professor, and (c) Informing and Transforming Practice.

### *Student Responsibility and Accountability and Self-Study Participation*

Two interesting aspects of the study results relevant to responsibility and accountability center around the (schoolyard) service-learning project and students' experiences as members of the student-directed course. A predominance of students in this study identified that they felt a heightened sense of accountability given they were engaged in a community-based project that had "real" implications for individuals outside the university. The experience provided a platform for students to engage in transformational learning (Brower, 2011; Mezirow, 1991) and enhance their capabilities in critical thinking, civic engagement, and social responsibility as they worked alongside the school teachers, parents, and students to codesign and install an outdoor classroom. As Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) conclude, the transformative potential of student-faculty partnerships in teaching and learning is maximized when three primary principles are applied: (a) respect, (b) reciprocity, and (c) shared responsibility. Results from my study provide further confirmation of these essential elements.

The community/academic project, the course, and self-study participation provided study participants with the opportunity to practically engage the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2014) with its focus on experience, reflection, forming new knowledge, and application. Kolb offers theoretical affirmation of students' experiences in this study, which is that the cycle and the study itself with its focus on reflection helped students reform their learning through experience. Kolb and Dewey (1938) emphasize that knowledge is not a steady state but rather is a process where experience interacts with previous knowledge and theoretical concepts to become learning.

Study participation provided a structured opportunity for students to reflect on the course content and process. As reported in the results, journaling provided one reflective platform. Yet journaling also presented students with a sense of obligation as many reported either dropping out of the study or feeling burdened by it. Hayman et al., (2012) and Taylor, Kermode, and Roberts (2006) conclude (in their respective studies) that participants need to be enthusiastic about journal-keeping for them to both engage with it regularly and for it to serve as useful data. They talk about the importance of "coaching" in journaling, suggesting guiding questions and providing clarity about terms and process as means to help promote participation. In the instance of this study, I wonder if adopting an online format or having a group blog might have helped sustain students' participation, and this is certainly something I am considering in advance of the next cohort. Other students did find the journaling valuable, so perhaps the varied reports from my study are based on individual preference and style more so than anything.

Relevant to class participation, some students expressed surprise that even without having marks attached to the project and attendance, they still showed up and participated. Other students from both cohorts (2012 and 2014) reported frustration that people sometimes did not show up for class, and without a mark as motivation, some students fell short of the group expectations. A number of students expressed the learning from these challenges as a developing awareness of the need to self-regulate when the responsibility shifts from an external motivator to an internal/intrinsic-value one. The course-internal dissonance of how students defined “meeting the expectations” and “success” resonates with Polk-Lepson’s (2013) research which explores student entitlement, work ethic, and professionalism. This researcher concluded that there are definite attitude differences between what students constitute to be appropriate levels of effort and participation and the associated reality. The same may be said for faculty members as universities have varied (sometimes inadequate) controlling mechanisms that govern performance (Dobele & Rundle-Theile, 2015). In addition, many of the performance metrics that do exist are based on specific cultural, gendered, hegemonic norms of what constitutes quality scholarship (Martinez, Chang, & Welton, 2015). Similar to students’ attitudes and actions, faculty too may adopt varying work ethics as a result, and in fact, faculty unions may serve as one source that subtly endorses mediocrity. Expectations for student responsibility and accountability and “doing” student-directed experiential education courses need to be considered within this wider academic climate as faculty may not choose the added work, responsibility, and pedagogical “risk” of such endeavors (Cassell & Halaseh, 2014). More will be said about that “risk” in the next section.

### *Structure and Role of the Professor*

Both students and I (as the professor/participant) identified the challenges with the structure of the course, in determining how much (and how little structure) was needed and identifying whose role it was to add that structure (when needed). One student described other students as academic/social loafers, expressing his surprise that I (as the course professor) did not take back control when this lax behavior was occurring. John Dewey came up a lot in student reports relevant to these themes. The comments ranged from students suggesting that reading Dewey without my guidance would have been prohibitively challenging to wondering if Robin Williams (see the movie *Dead Poets Society* for reference) would walk in, demanding that students rip up *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938).

Students talked about what I have previously referred to as the push/pull authority of the professor when “doing” student-directed experiential pedagogy (Breunig, 2014). Students identified that at times I took back control when it felt unnecessary and at other times, “allowed” for too much freedom, with one student in particular citing that “freedom is stressful.” Dewey (1938) refers to educative experiences as requiring minimum necessary structure to optimize student learning. Determining what is both minimum and necessary in any given environment remains a challenge as was the case for this course given students’ reports. My own journal reports expressed

uncertainty (and concern) about whether or not to “step in” (or not) and one student commented that the days that I was not in class, the group was “in shambles.” Other students noted that when I took a step back, there was a marked shift in the energy, with more positive contributions from students. I noted in my journal and in my focus group comments that student-directed pedagogy is “risky” for students and the professor alike as we all are navigating agency, authority, and shared responsibility in ways that are new.

Adding to this, Cranton (2011) highlights some of the typical (institutional) structural constraints with university teaching, including timetables, classroom configurations, enrollments, and promotion and tenure status. A number of students in my study wondered if the class would have been different (and perhaps more effective) if the enrollment was smaller. Some students expressed interest for “more of this type of pedagogy.” Traditional course teaching evaluations (often negatively) impinge results, impacting tenure and promotion and advancement opportunities in these courses given that the evaluations do not match the alternative content and pedagogical approach (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Professors also run the risk of being labeled as institutional “troublemakers” when engaging in counterhegemonic pedagogy (Stromquist, 2014), which resonates with some of my own reports as a study participant. As mentioned above, there is also the added work responsibility.

Structural constraints also include implicit and explicit rules and understandings about course conduct, mandated course descriptions and textbooks, attendance requirements, assignment marking, the socio-cultural background of the student cohort and the professor, the “bell curve” method of assigning grades, business-based models and metrics, and a focus on production for profit. These facets of postsecondary teaching and learning are components of the ever-increasing impacts of neoliberalism on education as the neoliberal ideals of commodification, privatization, and accountability promote a pedagogy that infantilizes and depoliticizes students and faculty (Giroux, 2015).

These barriers all serve to inform the degree of flexibility with structuring the course in any given semester. While a professor may suggest that the structure is cocreated and that students have agency, given these “real life” structural constraints, Ellsworth (1992), Stromquist (2014), and Breunig (2011b) have all contended that “empowerment,” “student voice,” “dialogue,” and “safe space” may actually be myths of liberation and repressive. As one student noted, her classrooms have not always been safe and just declaring them so does not make it real. Stromquist concludes that expecting major power reconfigurations through a set of alternative classroom practices, is simply not realistic and may, in fact, in light of the above, not be particularly desirable.

### *Informing and Transforming Practice*

As Stromquist (2014) suggests, while the university classroom can indeed be utilized as a site to realize the transformative capacities of education, there still lies some distance between the transformation of critical knowledge into effective praxis. I

appreciate the enthusiasm with which Cranton (2011) and Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) recommend various activities and instructional techniques to promote transformative learning and collaborative classrooms, but Keesing-Styles's (2003) conclusion that there are no specific recipes for how to "do" student-directed pedagogy resonates deeply with me, particularly as it relates to the study results. Alongside this, I appreciate Knowles (2014) conclusions that self-study of classroom practices is itself a social justice project, which seeks to undo and reimagine oppressive pedagogies in order to transform teachers, their students, and the knowledge with which they work. Caroline Kreber (2013) is another staunch advocate for reflexive SoTL that aims at improving learning and creating a better world within which to learn and teach.

It is also an invitation for one's own vulnerabilities to emerge (Knowles, 2014) (and by extension an invitation for students to reveal their vulnerabilities as well). Is this pedagogical risk-taking one that results in new learning and development for both the professor and the students? Certainly educators would benefit from training and practice in adopting alternative approaches given they often involve controversial topics and thus likely generate resistance among not only students but also administrators. Communities of scholarship and practice (Adams & Bell, 2016) may be one source of support for engaging in student-directed, transformational pedagogy. The intentional creation of a like-minded faculty cohort can serve as a source of support, collective advocacy, and professional development during challenging times.

Promoting collaborative approaches to teaching and learning and structured reflection that recognizes and questions frames of reference can lead to transformational praxes (Ossa Parra et al., 2014). This conclusion resonates with the results from my study as the majority of students from both cohorts identified the profound impacts on their future learning. One student concluded that the learning would influence his work/life in many ways, including his future role as a parent. A number of students talked about the lessons learned from Dewey's *Experience and Education* emphasizing the ways in which they anticipate integrating these into their lives.

I too experience new learning each time I engage self-study of my own classrooms. Ossa Parra et al. (2014) actually encourage pedagogues to collectively engage in critical reflection of their praxes as these authors themselves (impressively) meet every 3 weeks over the course of a year to talk about their teaching practices, to deepen their understanding of the learning experiences promoted in their classrooms. According to Boose and Hutchings (2016), the idea of sharing pedagogical successes and challenges is simply not a habit. And if not actively resisted, it is atypical for academics to be comfortable with or to make time to engage in conversation about this. In part, this may be due to the fact that careful examination of one's teaching can be risky (Boose & Hutchings, 2016) as I have mentioned throughout. Professors risk uncovering that a carefully designed course is not leading to the outcomes that matter most for students. Or they may find out that the course itself is outdated or less relevant to students' lives. Perhaps the question that arises out of much of these results is, "Is it worth the effort, successes and challenges to work toward congruence and coherence between professed teaching practices and those we engage?" I believe, at the end of each day, that it is better to at least strive for this than to not.



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