Experiential Learning: Redefining the University Experience

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What do gingerbread men and college students have in common? Similar to gingerbread men, many of us have spent a large part of our educational careers following the standard "cookie cutter" method of teaching, forcing redundancy and using little imagination. However, a new educational method that attacks this mundane routine has seen scalable implementation in universities over the past few years. This method, called experiential learning, forces students to push their limits and think outside of the box, throwing the cookie cutter methods out the window. Unlike the "monkey see, monkey do" approach some instructors take, experiential learning teaches students invaluable skills through hands-on experience. Rather than attempting to mold every student to the same standard shape, this method directs students to become naturally interested in learning, getting the most out of their educational experiences. Many students lacking this experience fall below the standards most employers expect in the dynamic, fast-paced world we live in. Having the ability to learn on your feet without instruction is a skill any student should have before entering the professional workforce.

Experiential learning, according to the Association for Experiential Education, "is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values" (Association for Experiential Education). In an experiential learning environment, students learn from one another through discovery and exploration in a semi-structured approach where instructors act as facilitators rather than directors. By exposing students to direct experiences tied to real-world problems, experiential learning attempts to address the question you may have asked yourself in high school geometry: When are we ever going to use this? Instead of being assigned to review a topic or read a textbook, experiential learning is a process where students are naturally interested in learning. Students are engaged in every way possible, recognizing personal stakes and "may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because the outcomes of the experience cannot totally be predicted" (Association for Experiential Education). These experiences help students transition from school, where most things are predictable and outlined in a syllabus, to the professional realm. In a model described by David A. Kolb (2014), chairman of Experience Based Learning Systems, experiential learning is the process that links education, work, and personal development. Kolb articulates the goal of experiential knowledge as a shift "away from the traditional concerns of credit hours and calendar time towards competence, working knowledge, and information truly pertinent to jobs, families, and communities." The benefits of experiential learning include: the ability to apply knowledge to complex new problems, the opportunity for creativity and reflection, seeing value in mistakes, and improved attitudes towards learning. These benefits are realized through the five-step cycle of experiential learning defined by the University of California Davis (UC Davis).

The five steps of experiential learning as defined by UC Davis are: exploration, sharing, processing, generalizing, and application (UC Davis 2011). The first step, exploration, or the *"Do it"* stage, is where students perform the activity with little to no help from the teacher. The sharing or *"What happened"* stage is when students publicly share their experience and results. In the processing stage, students ask themselves *"What's important?"* by reflecting and analyzing their experience to look for recurring themes. Generalizing has students ask *"So*

what?" by connecting their experience with real-world examples and principles. Lastly, in the application stage, students apply what they have learned to a similar or different situations and take a sense of ownership for what was learned by asking *"Now what?"* Through these five steps, students and instructors work together to focus on problem solving and critical thinking rather than memorization. This difference has been studied by many notable education psychologists, such as Carl Rogers, who considers experiential learning "significant" when compared to what he called "meaningless" rote learning (NIU).

University students and the way they learn are constantly evolving. Students are demanding more involved, dynamic, and complex modes of learning. The courses that contextualize rather dry content are more effective for our generation and engage students in a learning process that extends beyond the classroom. Marquette University has provided its students with outstanding experiences such as these to prepare them for the real world. Fortunately, we had the opportunity to experience experiential learning firsthand in our Introduction to Information Technology (IT) class.

Introduction to IT is a required course for all students in the College of Business Administration at Marquette. It includes a broad overview of topics such as business intelligence and analytics, the software development life cycle, enterprise architecture, and other business software applications. On the first day of class we came face-to-face with the semester long mini-consulting project, which involved designing and creating a database system on Microsoft Access. After hearing from past students that this project would involve many hours of work, we were intimidated. Most of us had never heard of Access, and were skeptical that in 14 weeks we were going to create a fully functional database for a non-profit organization. Our class was split into groups of five students, and each partnered with a local organization. The three of us were in separate groups that partnered with either Broadscope Disability Services or the Cathedral Center. Broadscope Disability Services provides services and resources for people and families living with disabilities. The Cathedral Center is an emergency center and case management provider working to end homelessness among women and children. Each team was given freedom and independence to complete the project and was individually responsible for managing its progress, coordinating activities, and communicating with the partner.

When the Cathedral Center teams met with the volunteer coordinator, we were overwhelmed by how much volunteer information was stored in Excel and organized in tabs by month, going back at least five years. Excel is one of the worst ways to store mass amounts of information because it can easily be distorted if the wrong command is chosen. The volunteer coordinator told us she had accidently corrupted all of her information a few months prior and spent weeks inputting the information into a new spreadsheet. After our visit, the impact a new database would have on the Cathedral Center was apparent. We gathered all of the information, necessary reports, and sample forms to build the foundation of the database: a volunteer application, an example report, and a list of requests. From there, we created a variety of diagrams to model how the organization functioned as a whole, while also planning how the database would streamline activities. The amount of time we spent building the database made us realize why this project was infamous among Marquette business students. However, looking back, the amount of time put in was worth it when we finally finished and delivered the final product to the Cathedral Center.

The process with Broadscope Disability Services was very similar to the Cathedral Center. The development and marketing associate was responsible for the management of information on volunteers and events, which was entirely stored on Excel. This presented several

problems like data redundancy and difficulty in transferring ownership from one employee's hard drive to another's. We gathered all the information a database would need to store for Broadscope and began the journey, feeling nervous, excited, and overwhelmed at the same time. When we presented the end product to Broadscope, to say it was rewarding would be an understatement. We were relieved to be done but also proud of the work we had accomplished.

This project was different from any we had done in the past. The end product was implemented by a real-world organization – not just presented in front of the class and stored in a filing cabinet at the end of the semester. Before starting the project, we hadn't realized the useful applications of databases and the potential role we would play in a non-profit organization's daily process management. The class was challenging, but taught us how to manage our time, work with a team, and ask for help when we needed it; without those skills our project wouldn't have been successful. Never in our educational careers were we challenged, intrigued, or pushed to our limits like we experienced in our Introduction to IT class. We took ownership and pride in the end results, not because we wanted to impress our classmates, but because we knew our database would be applied in a meaningful way. This is one of the most important aspects of experiential learning: the real-world experience and lasting impact that it leaves on students.

The final report of the mini-consulting project required us to write reviews of our experience over the semester. Roughly 90 percent of our class reported the project as being one of the hardest they've encountered, but also the most rewarding and useful as we move forward into the business world. Some of the most common words used to describe the experience were "intimidating," "beneficial," "overwhelming," "fulfilling," "rewarding," and "challenging." Many students discovered an interest in IT from the project and its application, and declared an IT major soon after, if not during, the course. Others reflected on the course as frustrating at times but that it taught them how to manage conflict and stress in a team. Several noted that the knowledge and skills from the course would help them to stand out in a competitive business setting.

The feedback given by our classmates had undoubtedly proved that the experience was worth it, and that it paid off in the end. Experiential learning allowed us to push ourselves, work proactively with each other, take ownership of the end product, and absorb valuable knowledge and skills not taught in other courses. Gingerbread men are diverse: depending on the chef, cooking time, and decorations, they will look different. The same goes for students: depending on the professor, the exposure to the topic, and experience gained in the field, they will be different. Experiential learning provides students with a strong background in their field of study and exposes them to skills that textbooks alone cannot provide. Instead of memorizing vocabulary terms and doing practice problems, students are given the opportunity to gain skills that will enable them to solve workplace problems – ultimately making them well rounded job candidates and ready to better and more creatively attack problems head-on in their chosen field. For knowledge to be useful and transferrable, it must come from a situation. As the wise Confucius once said: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." Remembering material is much different from understanding and being able to apply your knowledge. One student's reflection of the project accurately summarizes this idea: "Learning and studying for a test is one thing, but being able to implement that knowledge is another." Experiential learning prepares students to be self-directed lifelong learnings, an outcome lacking in most traditional academic structures today. This experience has been incredible, and the sense of accomplishment from real-world experience rather than rote memorization only excites us to learn more in an experiential learning setting in the years to come.

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